You're Just Another Sacrifice...
Silent Oaths
NOUHA JULLIENNE

Silent Oaths

NOUHA JULLIENNE

OceanofPDF.com

SILENT OATHS: A DARK WHY CHOOSE
NOUHA JULLIENNE

Editing by Alexa at The Fiction Fix
Cover Design by 3crows Author Services
Formatting by Danielle Sarah

This book is a work of fiction. All characters, places, incidents, and dialogue were created from the author's imagination. Nothing in this story should be constructed as real. Any similarities between persons living or dead are entirely accidental.
COPYRIGHT © NOUHA JULLIENNE ATOUI

All rights reserved. This book and its content are protected by Canadian copyright law. Except as otherwise provided for under Canadian copyright law, this book and its content may not be copied, published, distributed, downloaded or otherwise stored in a retrieval system, transmitted or converted, in any form or by any means, electronic or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

OceanofPDF.com

CONTENTS

Stay Up to Date with Nouha Jullienne
Trigger Warnings

1. Theodore
2. Theodore
3. Theodore
4. Julian
5. Isabel
6. Maxwell
7. Isabel
8. Isabel
9. Isabel
10. Theodore
11. Theodore
12. Julian
13. Theodore
14. Theodore
15. Theodore
16. Isabel
17. Isabel
18. Theodore
19. Theodore
20. Isabel
21. Theodore
22. Isabel
23. Maxwell
24. Isabel
25. Theodore
26. Isabel
27. Theodore
28. Isabel
29. Theodore
30. Theodore
31. Isabel
32. Maxwell
33. Julian
34. Theodore
35. Isabel
36. Theodore
37. Isabel

Epilogue

BONUS EPILOGUE
Acknowledgments
Also by Nouha Jullienne

OceanofPDF.com

STAY UP TO DATE WITH NOUHA JULLIENNE

If you’d like to support me or keep up with my new projects, scan the QR code to subscribe to my newsletter, join my Facebook reader group, etc.!

OceanofPDF.com

TRIGGER WARNINGS

This book contains themes and scenes that may be disturbing or triggering to some readers:

- Graphic violence and physical assault
- Use of knives during sex and torture
- Knife throwing games involving fear arousal
- Ritual scarification and branding
- Carving words into skin during sex
- Slapping during sex (impact kink)
- Scenes involving blood, injury, and restraint
- Explicit scenes of physical punishment
- Graphic penetrative sex (MF, MM, MMMF)
- Group sex with restraint and degradation
- Dubious consent
- Somnophilia (noncon)
- Forced oral (borderline noncon)
- Knife kink during intercourse
- Breeding kink / possessive claiming
- Cumplay / cum insertion into vagina
- Dom/sub undertones
- Praise kink and degradation kink
- Psychological trauma from childhood abandonment
- Mentions of self-harm obsession and emotional detachment
- Emotional manipulation by captors

- Forced captivity and drugging
- Mental/emotional breakdowns and isolation
- References to ritual sacrifice of women
- Murder, including arson and torture
- Familial abuse and neglect
- Suicidal ideation (implied)
- Child abandonment and institutional trauma

OceanofPDF.com

For every reader who's ever fallen for the villain, the troublemaker, or the broken boy behind the mask.

OceanofPDF.com

To Isabel, for surviving the Whitmores.

OceanofPDF.com

And to the Whitmores, for not surviving her.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

I ’ve always preferred watching from below.

You learn more from the shadows than you ever will in the light.

Seated on a leather chair in the basement, I lean forward, my gaze fixed on the wall of screens.

My eyes glance between the flickering images as the cameras shift to the front of the property, where the first guests arrive for the Whitmore family’s infamous Halloween party.

Through the footage, I watch as headlights slice through the thickening fog clinging over the driveway. The iron gate opens, and costumed figures step cautiously onto the grounds, casting long, ghostly shadows under the orange glow of the lanterns. Some of them pause, looking around with hesitant expressions, as if they can sense a more nefarious undercurrent.

On one of the monitors, I spot my adoptive father in the grand entryway, his polished smile directed at each new guest. There’s a calculated warmth in his greeting, his handshake firm, his eyes assessing. For a moment, it feels as though he’s looking straight at me through the monitor, and a chill runs down my spine. I shift in my seat, my fingers tapping restlessly against the armrests.

I watch as the visitors drift deeper into the house, unaware of what lies beneath its perfect, polished surface. Down here, surrounded by silence, I feel as if I’m part of the mansion itself, bound to its secrets, watching as the night unfolds.

For as long as I can remember, my father has hosted these parties. When I was younger, I had no idea what was involved. We were never allowed to

stay long enough to know.

Like clockwork, he'd send us to the smaller guest house on the property with our keeper, Ms. Deering. My adoptive brothers and I weren't strangers to that house—we often hid there when we needed to escape the mansion's stuffy atmosphere, where everything inside felt cold, monotone, and lifeless.

When the Whitmores adopted us, we didn't have a place to call home. So, in a way, I should feel grateful. However, there was always something sinister about this place, a feeling that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up when the halls were too quiet.

Early on, we learned not to question things, though I would often catch myself clenching my fists, trying to keep my thoughts buried.

There were ominous meetings between my father and the men he entertained, whispered exchanges between my parents and the house staff, and forbidden rooms we were never allowed to enter. And then, of course, there was this very area in the basement, filled with monitors displaying footage of every corner of the house, save for the living quarters.

Slowly, my brothers and I started uncovering the truth, and in turn, our father began involving us more in the family legacy.

I remember the first time he took me aside.

"*You are not just my son,*" he told me. "*You are a tool to ensure the Whitmore name survives, thrives, and grows. You are a piece in this family's legacy, and every choice you make is a choice for the family. It is the only thing that matters.*"

He said it with such conviction, as if it was a truth I should have known from the day I arrived, but those words dug in deep. They reminded me I had never been allowed to be anything more than an extension of his will. He didn't raise us to think for ourselves, to question what we were being taught. He raised us to obey.

As the eldest, I was assigned the role of heir, my brothers as my seconds, even though I never wanted the responsibility.

Each time he talked about it, I felt a heavy weight settle on my shoulders, a tightness in my chest that grew with each passing day.

But he promised power.

Power… a tantalizing allure that whispers sweet nothings to the soul. It is a seductive little thing—intoxicating, like the richest wine, seeping into

the veins and igniting a primal hunger. It's a force that taps into a person's deepest needs for control and security.

I wanted it, wanted to hold it, feel the sense of control, a chance to mold the world to my will and decide my own fate.

As always, the members of Vanguard will attend the Halloween party, each required to wear the same eerie white mask—my brothers and me included. The mask covers only half our faces, and though I've never understood its purpose, my father insists it's tradition.

Vanguard is a sanctuary for the city's wealthiest and most influential men—socialites, politicians, business tycoons, and the like. It's a place of privilege, an inner circle where only a select few are permitted. Membership is strictly by invitation, and each potential inductee is subjected to an exhaustive investigation to ensure they meet the club's exacting standards.

It's a fucking joke.

I pick up my mask from the desk, tracing its sleek surface with my fingertips. One day, these masks will represent more than the Whitmore legacy and Vanguard. My brothers and I will redefine it.

For us, the experience was far different. The rigorous screening didn't apply to us; the family name alone served as our admission. As Whitmores, we weren't invited so much as forced, inheriting memberships like a curse.

Though we aren't truly Whitmores, not by blood. Each of us came from different families, plucked from different pasts and thrust together under the same roof. We share a name, not a lineage, bound not by love or loyalty but by the heritage forced upon us.

Setting the mask down, I look back at the screens.

More guests arrive, and I immediately notice the imbalance—far more women than men. Knowing what happens in some of these rooms, I can already sense the predatory gleam in my father's associates' eyes.

They always present themselves as proper businessmen, but I know the truth. They're predators—the worst kind. They make their own rules, ignoring any semblance of societal norms. With unlimited funds and the whole town of Ebonridge in their pockets, it's no wonder they get away with murder.

Literally.

It's not that I don't consider myself a predator, but I don't feast on innocent women the way they do.

I can’t deny the darkness within me, even if it’s not the same twisted hunger as my father.

As I glance around the room, adjusting the cuffs of my fitted, three-piece suit and feeling the reassuring weight of the blade in its holster at my waist, I know I’ve embraced the macabre. This world of darkness and bloodshed has become my own, each kill pushing me further into the shadows I once thought I could avoid. Perhaps one day, I’ll suffer the same fate as those I hunt.

I take a slow sip of my Macallan, the smoky warmth sliding down my throat, and then I swivel in the chair, facing the long hallway to the door, and I release a slow exhale.

It’s time to play my part.

Before I get up to leave, I glance at the monitors one last time. On one of the screens showing the living room, I catch sight of a woman I’ve never seen at our estate. A blonde bombshell—the stereotypical Barbie type.

Something about her seems off. She’s not relaxed; there’s tension in her posture, a nervous glance as she scans the area, like she’s looking for something—or someone. She looks uncomfortable, as if she doesn’t want to be here, but something keeps her rooted to the spot, like she’s on a mission she can’t back out of. She’s alone, but I doubt she came by herself.

I lean closer, studying the woman, trying to decipher her intentions when, suddenly, someone else steps into the frame.

They take my breath away.

Brunette, long, wavy hair, bronze skin, and a chest that’s impossible to ignore. She radiates mischief, and I can feel my cock twitch as she smiles from ear to ear while talking to her friend. For the occasion, she’s dressed as a mermaid, and I can’t take my eyes off her.

A siren—captivating, irresistible, with an enchanting presence that seeps through the screen.

I suddenly need to know everything about her.

The way she looks is more than enough to make my pulse quicken.

I’ve spent enough years observing people around me to know when someone is hiding something, and this woman definitely is.

She might be exactly what I’ve been searching for.

As I step out of the basement, I leave the door cracked. If that blonde is looking for answers, I’ll make sure she finds something she’ll never forget.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

When my brothers return to the estate later that night, having both missed the party, I show them the brunette who caught my attention.

"I had a background check done. Her name is Isabel Lucia Soto."

"She went upstairs with Montclair?" Julian's tone is sharp, his dark brows furrowing as he leans in closer.

"She did," I confirm, tapping the screen to play the clip. Isabel follows Montclair into one of the private rooms, her movements hesitant but curious. The way she scanned the room during the party, the way her gaze lingered on the staircase before she followed him—it wasn't fear. It was intrigue.

"She looks sort of familiar," Julian murmurs, more to himself than to us. He grabs his phone, his fingers moving with ease as he types something.

Maxwell studies the screen, his jaw tightening. "Montclair's a reckless fool. Bringing someone like her to the east wing during a party? He's lucky she didn't see something she shouldn't."

"She didn't," I assure him. "She left before anything happened."

Julian raises an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced.

I press play on the footage again. "Watch."

The screen shows Isabel standing by the window, her arms crossed as Montclair leans in closer, speaking to her in a low voice. She doesn't look frightened, just wary, her gaze flicking toward the door, as if debating her escape. He corners her onto the bed, and that's when her expression changes to fear.

Then, suddenly, the door bursts open. Another woman storms in, her blonde hair a wild halo around her furious face. It's the friend I saw her with earlier in the evening—Valeria Estrada.

The footage is grainy, but even without sound, Valeria's anger is palpable. She steps between Isabel and Montclair, shoving him back with enough force to make him stumble. Montclair's hands shoot up in mock surrender, but she doesn't back down. She's pointing toward the door, her protective stance unmistakable.

Isabel looks stunned but relieved as Valeria grabs her arm and pulls her out of the room.

Julian lets out a low whistle as the footage ends. "Didn't expect that."

"Neither did I," Maxwell admits, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Looks like Montclair bit off more than he could chew."

Julian's eyes narrow as he studies me. "You think they're going to be a problem?"

"Not yet," I say, leaning back in my chair. "But the mermaid might be."

Maxwell raises a brow. "She looks harmless."

"She works as an investigative reporter for The Black Quill," I reply.

The Black Quill is Ebonridge's one and only media outlet.

Julian snorts. "So? We've dealt with reporters before."

"She's already digging," I add, leaning forward. "She also started poking around places she has no business being. If she uncovers something—anything—it won't just be a personal issue. It could blow up in our faces."

The people of Ebonridge are blind to the truth of what happens at these parties. To them, the Whitmores are just a powerful family, a name that carries weight and influence. They see the glitz, the glamour, the social gatherings, never suspecting the bloodshed, the manipulation, the rituals that lie beneath. To the town, we are nothing but a legacy built on wealth and charm.

"*Both* of them have been digging where they shouldn't. Isabel might look like she stumbled into this, but no one like her just stumbles into anything," I add.

Maxwell runs a hand through his hair. "So what are we dealing with here?"

"We're dealing with two women who have more curiosity than self-preservation. And the longer they're here, the more likely they'll find

something we don’t want them to.”

If someone were to uncover even the slightest hint of what really goes on in this house, it wouldn’t just be a scandal—it would be a frenzy, the kind that would rip through the town like wildfire. People would want answers, the town would want blood, and the last thing we need right now is the population turned against us, especially not when we’re already walking a thin line trying to break free from our father’s hold.

“We need keep a closer eye on them, then,” Julian says matter-of-factly.

“Exactly. Especially our little siren.” The corners of my mouth pull into a small, knowing smile.

Isabel is a threat, but she’s also a potential asset, depending on how we play this.

We all know the goal is to dethrone our adoptive father from the empire he built, end the legacy of fear and control that he’ll leave behind.

However, that’s the tricky part.

We want him gone, but we can’t afford to lose everything in the process. Our reputation is all we’ve ever had. If we want to take control, we can’t be painted as the villains in this story. We must play it carefully. Isabel might be our ticket, but if she digs too deep, she could become the spark that burns it all down.

Julian suddenly stiffens; his eyes fixed on his screen. “I knew it.” A frown spreads across his face as he turns it toward us. “You’re gonna want to see this.”

I take the phone from him, my eyes narrowing at the image. It’s Isabel, wearing a fitted uniform and balancing a tray of drinks, her brown hair tied back. The backdrop is unmistakable: Vanguard.

My head snaps toward him. “She works at the club?” I ask in disbelief.

Julian nods, leaning back in his chair. “Waitress. She’s been there almost a year. Quiet, professional, keeps her head down. But something about her…” His voice trails off, and I know exactly what he means.

“That didn’t show up in the background check,” I huff.

“That’s because *Isabel Lucia Soto* isn’t the name she’s been going by.” Julian rests his elbows on the table. “She has been working under the pseudonym Margot Vale.”

Julian oversees the club’s patronage, so he’s aware of who comes in and out.

I narrow my eyes. “You’re telling me she’s been under our roof this entire time?”

Julian shrugs. “I guess so. When I saw her on the footage, I recognized her despite the Halloween makeup. It was enough to make me look into the club’s employee records.”

Maxwell exhales and tilts his head. “And you’re sure it’s her?”

“Positive. You can’t hide from someone who knows what to look for,” Julian replies.

Maxwell lets out a low whistle, shaking his head. “Theo, you’re the Head of Council. You never noticed her? Vanguard should be your second home.”

“Funny,” I retort, tossing Julian’s phone onto the table, “coming from someone who spends most of his nights holed up in his nightclub.”

Maxwell’s smirk falters for a moment, but he quickly recovers with a shrug. “At least I show up. You’re the ghost of Vanguard.”

Julian scoffs, but I ignore them both. It’s true. I rarely set foot in Vanguard anymore. As Head of Council, I’m technically required to oversee its operations, but the reality is, I only show up for the monthly meetings. Those are always after hours, when the place is empty save for select senior staff.

I simply don’t have the time. Between running Vanguard Systems, our cybersecurity firm, and negotiating the acquisition of a lucrative business venture, the club has fallen low on my list of priorities. It is stable, profitable, and self-sufficient. That’s all that matters. Or at least, that’s what I tell myself.

But now, Isabel is disrupting that carefully managed order, a variable I didn’t account for.

Maxwell crosses his arms. “Anyway, what’s the move now?”

“We keep her close enough to never slip through the cracks again.”

Julian smirks, though there’s an edge to it now. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t go anywhere. After all, no one gets in or out of Vanguard without me knowing.”

“And we’ll figure out what she’s really doing here, because there’s no way she stumbled into this by accident,” I add, my voice low. “She doesn’t seem to shy away from danger. She’s drawn to it.”

“That makes her a liability,” Maxwell says.

“No,” I correct him. “That makes her an opportunity.”

“Once she’s in, there’s no going back,” Maxwell retorts. “She’ll have blood on her hands just like the rest of us.”

I nod. “She’ll either play along or bury herself trying to escape.”

My mind races through the possibilities. Isabel seems bold, resourceful, and unpredictable. If we play this right, she could be the perfect tool to bring down Father.

“Trust me—by the time we’re done with her, she’ll be exactly where we need her,” I state.

Julian exhales sharply, running a hand through his short hair. “This is a dangerous game, Theo.”

“That’s the only kind we play, brother,” Maxwell retorts, a sneer tugging at his lips.

The three of us sit in silence for a moment, the weight of our plan settling over the room. Outside, the wind howls, rattling the windows of the guest house. The Whitmore mansion looms in the distance, its glowing windows a constant reminder of the power we’re about to seize.

Isabel has no idea what’s coming.

“And it’s exactly why she’s perfect,” I add, locking eyes with my brothers. “She has the fire we need.”

Maxwell gives a skeptical look. “For the plan, or for *you*?”

The corner of my mouth twitches, but I don’t rise to his bait. Instead, I turn my attention back to the screen, rewinding the footage to the moment Isabel first caught my eye. Her bold red lips and the defiant glint in her eyes drew me in like a moth to a flame.

“You both feel it,” I say, my voice insistent. “You feel that pull.”

Julian smirks, reaching for his glass of bourbon. “You’re not wrong. She’s…fascinating.”

Maxwell remains silent for a moment before finally nodding. “She has potential.”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

OceanofPDF.com

Two weeks later

My phone vibrates, and I pick up without checking the caller I.D.

"How's Mother?" I ask.

A deep voice echoes through the speaker. "At the Inn, fast asleep," Julian replies.

"The drugs worked then," I confirm. We mixed a hefty dose of Benzos into her wine at dinner tonight.

"She'll be out 'til morning."

Normally, our adoptive mother stays on the estate for these parties, but with what we have planned, we need to keep her out of the way.

"Is everything set at the house?" Julian adds.

Unlike the Halloween party, tonight is game night—an exclusive, invite-only gathering with one purpose: to play a game. But this isn't a casual evening of good food, drinks, and laughter between friends. No, it's dark, twisted, and deadly. A night fueled by hate, destruction, and the thirst for blood.

Latibulum Noctis.

Before being thrust into the darkness of our world, we were groomed for it, but nothing could have prepared us for what truly laid ahead.

I didn't know what it meant until my eighteenth birthday. That night, my father led me into the cold, stone room beneath the estate. I had thought it would be a test of loyalty, maybe some symbolic gesture to welcome me into adulthood.

I was wrong.

A woman was already there when we entered, blindfolded and trembling. Her hands were tied, her breathing erratic. I remember how her dark hair spilled over her shoulders, the thin line of blood trickling from her lip where she must've bitten down. She wasn't screaming, just quietly pleading under her breath, as if she thought someone might listen.

"What is this?" I asked, my voice shaking as I stepped back. "Why is she here?"

Father didn't answer right away. Instead, he handed me a blade. It was long and ceremonial, its hilt engraved with the symbols of Vanguard.

"This is your passage into adulthood."

I stared at him, horrified. "You want me to—"

“It’s for the family,” he said, firmer this time. “This is how you prove yourself. This is how you earn your place.”

I looked at the woman again, my chest tightening. She was crying, her shoulders shaking with quiet sobs. I kept waiting for him to tell me it was a test, that none of it was real, but he didn’t. He just stood there, watching, waiting, his presence a suffocating shadow pressing down on me.

“Why?” I asked, my voice breaking. “Why do I have to do this?”

“Because it is the way of Vanguard,” he said simply, his tone so indifferent, it made my stomach churn. “You’re a Whitmore. You carry this legacy, and this is how we survive. This is how *you* survive.”

I don’t know how long I stood there, the knife trembling in my hand. Long enough for her to start whispering prayers I didn’t understand, long enough for my father to grow impatient. Finally, he leaned in close, his voice a sharp whisper in my ear.

“Do it,” he hissed. “Or you’re nothing. No one. You don’t walk away from this family. You don’t walk away from *me*.”

I did it.

I still see her face in my dreams sometimes—the wide, panicked expression behind the blindfold as I stepped closer, the way her body jerked as the blade found its mark. I still hear her final breath, the sickening silence that followed. It wasn’t quick, and it wasn’t clean. It was messy, brutal, and wrong.

That night, I became part of Vanguard. I became my father’s pawn. But I’ve never killed another woman, not after her.

The memory fades, and I’m back in the present, my phone pressed to my ear.

“Theo?” Julian says.

“Everything is set at the house,” I tell him, answering his earlier question. “The guests have started arriving. Maxwell is already working the room.”

While the staff were busy readying the mansion, I slipped away to the guest house for final preparations to welcome our visitor.

“And Isabel?” my brother asks.

“She’ll be here soon.”

We knew we couldn’t let this opportunity slip by. She would be ours, a siren caught and caged. The thought of having her for myself sends a pulse

of anticipation through me, quickening my breath. My fingers tingle at the idea of what's to come.

Tonight, there will be a sacrifice, and ours will be Isabel.

The irony isn't lost on me. Perhaps we're not so different from our adoptive father after all.

There's a pause on the line before Julian speaks again. "And the plan?"

"Intact," I confirm. "By the time she realizes what's really happening, it'll be too late."

I've been watching Isabel closely for a couple weeks now, since the Halloween party, and there's one thing I'm sure of: her friend Valeria is looking for something. I'm not sure exactly what, but I've seen the way she searches with intent.

She took the bait on Halloween night, when I carelessly left the basement door open. She went downstairs and no doubt saw the monitors. That's why I'm sure she'll be back tonight, Isabel following in her footsteps. The temptation to get answers will be too great to resist.

"Good," Julian says. "We don't get another chance at this, Theo. You know that, right? If it goes wrong—"

"It won't," I cut him off sharply, leaving no room for doubt. "I've thought of everything. I've been watching Isabel and her friend. They're predictable. Trust me."

Julian exhales. "You say that, yet I can't help but wonder if this is more about her than the plan."

His words strike a nerve, but I don't let it show. "This is about *Father*. It always has been. She's just… collateral."

Another pause stretches between us. Finally, Julian speaks. "Just make sure you remember that. Don't think with your dick, Theo."

I clench my jaw, my grip tightening around the phone. "I don't need the reminder."

After we hang up, I take a moment to collect myself.

Tonight, everything changes.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

JULIAN

I end the call with Theodore and slip my phone back into my pocket.

Taking a deep breath, I glance over at the passenger seat where Mother sat just minutes ago. She was leaning against the side of the car, eyes half-closed, the sedative starting to kick in. I could see her attempts to keep herself awake slowly faltering as the drugs did their job.

It took a lot to get her to the Ebonridge Rose Inn, the quaint little place a few miles out of town that's as much a sanctuary as it is a prison. I had to practically drag her out of the house. She protested, of course, her voice high-pitched and shrill as she demanded to stay in the estate's living quarters. I could hear the irritation in her tone as she insisted she was fine, that there was no need for a night away. But tonight wasn't about her comfort.

No, it was about business. The last thing I needed was her sniffing around when the real party started.

The guards at the estate helped me pack her things. I didn't trust her on her own, especially not after the way she'd been acting. Maxwell, as the warden of security at Vanguard, always has foot soldiers at his disposal—so he sent one to follow me to the inn, just in case something went wrong. Mother is far too unpredictable to leave unattended.

By the time I arrived at the inn, the drugs had done their job. She was mumbling incoherently, fighting sleep with a mixture of confusion and stubbornness. But once she hit the bed in the expansive room, her protests ceased. Maxwell's guard locked the door behind me, ensuring no one would disturb her before I returned.

I start the car and pull out of the parking lot, my blacked-out Aventador gleaming under the streetlights. It's the kind of car that demands attention, whether I want it or not. The tires screech as I shift into gear, speeding toward the Whitmore estate.

The cool night air rushes in through the window, and I let it settle against my skin, pushing thoughts of my mother to the back of my mind. Tonight is about claiming power.

The mansion looms in the distance, its silhouette cutting through the dark sky like a shadowed king. As I drive through the gates, I can feel the tension in the air. The guests are already arriving, unaware of what awaits them inside.

I park the car in the garage, the engine purring one last time before I shut it off. The silence is a welcome change after the roar of the streets.

A quick glance at my watch tells me I have just enough time.

My white mask slips easily into place, the cool porcelain fitting snugly against my face.

I step out of the car and head for the main entrance.

The game will begin soon.

MAXWELL IS ALREADY INSIDE, WORKING THE ROOM WITH THAT DAMN SMIRK plastered across his face. He thrives in crowds like this, soaking up the attention, his charm drawing people in like moths to a flame. It's effortless for him, and I envy that sometimes—not that I'd ever admit it.

I stick to the edges where I belong. The noise, the faces, the constant buzz in the room—it grates on me. I keep my head down, my distance measured, careful not to invite attention. People don't notice me, and that's how I prefer it. But I see them.

I see everything.

My role tonight isn't to mingle or play the host. It's to stay invisible and keep my eyes open.

Maxwell can have the spotlight.

I step further into the grand hall, the sound of laughter and clinking glasses echoing off the marble floors.

Father stands just a few feet away, talking to his associates, wearing a well-honed and practiced smile. The sight of him twists my stomach, and I suppress the urge to shudder.

I've never been a fan of Lionel Whitmore.

Despite adopting me from St. Dismas' Home for Boys, I've never once felt thankful for him. Lionel doesn't do things out of the goodness of his heart. He's a man who calculates every move, who twists every action into an advantage. Adopting us wasn't about love or filling some paternal void. It was about securing pawns—three boys he could groom into perfect tools for his schemes.

The day I stepped onto the Whitmore estate, I stopped being a person. At thirteen, I was the youngest of the three. Naive. Quiet. Desperate to belong. So, I stayed silent. I listened, absorbed everything. They underestimated me, just like they always underestimate the quiet ones.

But the ones who speak the least are often the most dangerous, the most lethal.

Lionel's gaze finds me, and I stiffen. He snags another glass of amber liquid from a passing tray and makes his way toward me.

For fuck's sake.

"Julian," he greets, his voice carrying a false weight, like he's trying too hard to sound intimidating. He extends the glass toward me.

"Father." I give him a curt nod and take the drink, my face impassive.

He lingers, his dark eyes studying me like I'm some problem he has yet to solve. "Ms. Deering told me your mother left for the night," he says, his tone bordering on accusatory. "Do you have anything to do with that?"

"Yes." There's no point in lying. He always discovers the truth eventually.

I sip the bourbon, letting the bitter heat burn as it runs down my throat.

Lionel narrows his eyes. "Care to tell me why?"

"No."

I meet his gaze, unflinching. Lionel knows better than pushing me when I don't want to talk. He learned that the hard way. In the early years, he tried to beat answers out of me, but as I grew taller—stronger—that tactic quickly lost its effectiveness. Now, he's nothing more than a scrawny old man with too much hubris and not enough muscle to back it up.

Lionel studies me for a beat longer before a thin, humorless smile tugs at his lips. "Fair enough. The night will start soon. Can I count on you and

your brothers to participate?”

We don’t usually take part in the games during *Latibulum Noctis*. Not out of fear or weakness, but because we see them for what they are: an illusion, a rigged spectacle designed to convince the participants they have a chance. But the truth is, the mark is always chosen before the night even begins. No guest truly knows what happens after midnight.

This time, though, we’ll be playing our own game.

I nod, giving him nothing else. Lionel’s lips press into a thin line, and he shakes his head as he walks away. I watch him retreat, and a bitter thought claws its way to the surface.

I can’t wait until he’s fucking dead.

From across the room, Theodore catches my eye, lifting his glass in a silent invitation. I make my way over to him.

As always, Theo looks perfectly composed, his tailored suit unruffled, his expression betraying only confidence.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you’re an alcoholic,” I deadpan.

He scoffs, swirling the liquor in his glass. “Enjoying a fine drink is hardly grounds for concern, Julian.”

“The way you consume that *garbage*? Yes, it is.”

Theo steps back, mock offense written all over his face. “Garbage? Since when did you become a fucking scotch connoisseur?”

I let the corner of my mouth lift. “Calm down, Theo. It’s just a joke.”

“You don’t joke,” he retorts flatly, narrowing his eyes.

He’s not wrong.

I take another sip of my drink, the bourbon warming me from the inside out. “Today is a special day.”

Theo’s lips curl into a grin—a dangerous, wolfish thing. “You’ve got that right.” He pulls out his phone, his expression triumphant. “According to the tracker I installed on Isabel’s phone, Valeria is on her way to pick her up now.”

I blink, momentarily stunned. “You put a tracker on her phone?” I don’t know why I’m surprised. Theo is a master hacker and can pretty much do anything on a computer.

Theo’s grin only widens. “Of course. I can even read her texts. Look.” He holds the screen toward me, proud as ever.

When I look, I see Isabel’s text exchange with Valeria.

Val: Come out now.

Isa: Yes, Mommy.

Val: Haha. Two minutes.

“You’re obsessed,” I say.

Theo shrugs, unapologetic. “I just know what I want.”

And he always gets what he wants. That’s the thing about Theo—his determination is both admirable and terrifying. I’ve never seen him so focused, so… *personal* about a plan before.

I glance around, searching for Maxwell. If Isabel is close, we’ll need to greet her together. I spot him at the far end of the room, surrounded by a group of women hanging on his every word.

I roll my eyes and push off the wall, leaving Theo to his scheming. As I approach Max, his laughter carries over the conversation.

The women surrounding him are giggling as he’s perched on the edge of a chaise lounge, one foot on the floor, the other resting on the arm of the chair in a careless sprawl. He’s laughing—loud, unrestrained, the kind that pulls people in, even if they don’t know what’s funny.

As I get closer, I catch the tail end of whatever ridiculous story he’s telling.

“… and that’s when I realized I’d stolen the priest’s car,” Maxwell finishes, throwing his hands up in mock exasperation. The women erupt into laughter, leaning closer to him, their eyes sparkling with delight.

One of them, a brunette wearing too much lipstick, rests her hand on his arm. “Oh, you’re *terrible*!” she says, but her tone suggests she means the exact opposite.

Maxwell grins, flashing teeth as he leans in conspiratorially. “Darling, you have no idea.”

Before I can say anything, he suddenly leaps to his feet, startling the women. One of them gasps, nearly spilling her drink.

“Right, then! Who wants to see a trick?” he announces, spreading his arms wide, like a ringmaster at a circus.

The women exchange amused glances, their curiosity piqued. “What kind of trick?” one of them asks, her tone playful.

Maxwell winks, his grin turning wicked. “The dangerous kind.”

I stop a few feet away, crossing my arms as I watch him with a mix of exasperation and mild amusement.

From his jacket pocket, he pulls out a small, wickedly sharp knife, the blade catching the light as he twirls it with practiced ease.

"Max," I warn, my voice low.

He glances at me, his grin widening. "Relax, Juju. I'm just having a bit of fun."

One of the women gasps, her eyes going wide. "Is that real?"

"Real as the moon in the sky, sweetheart," Maxwell replies.

Before anyone can protest, he tosses the knife into the air. It spins in a silver blur, and for a split second, I'm sure he's going to let it fall—but of course, he doesn't. He catches it effortlessly by the handle, his movement so fluid, it's as if the blade is an extension of his hand.

The women applaud, their laughter mingling with nervous gasps. One of them fans herself dramatically. "You're insane!"

"Guilty as charged," Maxwell says with a bow, but his eyes flick to me, and for a moment, the wild gleam in them sharpens into something more calculated. He's playing the fool, as always, but beneath the act, Maxwell is anything but careless.

I step closer, lowering my voice so only he can hear. "Isabel will be here any minute. Try not to scare her off before we even start."

Maxwell smirks, slipping the knife back into his pocket. "Oh, come on, Julian. Where's the fun in that?"

"This isn't a game," I remind him.

"Everything's a game, little brother. The trick is making sure you're the one holding the deck."

Maxwell is unpredictable, but he's also strangely magnetic. People can't help but be drawn to him, even when they know they probably shouldn't be.

Even when *I* know I shouldn't be.

It has always been this way, even back in the orphanage. Before we were Whitmores, before we had a name that meant anything, there was *him.*

Maxwell had this effortless way of making people orbit him, like he belonged to no one, but could own you in a single glance. He could talk his way out of trouble or straight into it, and it never mattered, because he always landed on his feet.

And I always followed.

I should've resented it. Maybe, in some ways, I did. But it didn't stop the pull, the way my chest would tighten when he grinned at me from across the room, like we shared a secret only we understood. It didn't stop

the way my pulse stuttered whenever he got too close, his voice low and teasing, daring me to push him away.

I never did.

Even now, after everything, after years of blood and loyalty and a family name that's more curse than blessing, that pull is still there. He's infuriating, reckless, impossible. But when he looks at me like that—when he tilts his head, smirks like he knows *exactly* what he's doing—it makes it hard to breathe.

I school my expression, ignoring the warmth creeping up my spine. "You know, one of these days, that charm of yours is going to run out."

Maxwell just smirks, lazy and knowing. "Not on you, Juju. Never on you."

And damn him, he's right.

With that, he turns back to his audience, raising his glass in a mock toast. "To danger, darlings!"

The ladies cheer, their laughter ringing out.

"If you want more," he calls over the noise, "catch me at Madhouse any night. Ask for Madcap." With a flourish, he winks at the women.

They squeal, eating it up, but I've already turned away, heading back toward Theodore.

Maxwell might play the joker, but I know him too well to be fooled. Beneath the theatrics and chaos, there's always a method to his madness.

And tonight, madness might be exactly what we need.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

ISABEL

I’m standing in front of my closet, biting my lip, trying to decide what to wear.

There’s a lot to consider. Do I go bold? Do I go subtle?

I tug a few dresses off the rack, holding each up to my body, checking them out in the mirror. Nothing feels right. Nothing *perfectly* screams the vibe I’m going for tonight.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and pause, my stomach twisting. The memory of the Halloween party, Montclair’s hand on my arm, his breath hot on my ear... I shudder involuntarily, pushing the thoughts back into the dark recesses of my mind. Gross.

His words were even worse. *“You’ll learn how to please me, darling.”* That sick smile of his... I roll my eyes and shake it off. I’m doing this for Val, after all, not for him.

I glance at the clock on my nightstand. Nearly time to go.

I sigh and pull the short, purple tie-dyed skirt off the hanger, the one I know will turn heads but not *too* much. Subtle yet flirty. As I slip into it, my mind races back to the reason I’m doing this. Camila. My best friend, Valeria’s, long-lost love.

Ever since Val and I aged out of Gloomwood Orphanage, she’s been searching for her. She made a vow to find Camila, no matter what it took, and I promised I’d help her every step of the way. We’re closer than we’ve ever been to finding information that leads to her.

I took a part-time job at Vanguard, slipping in as a waitress to brush shoulders with the town’s most elite men. I started going by Margot Vale, a

name that offered just enough mystery to keep my real identity safe.

As a reporter for The Black Quill, the last thing I needed was for anyone to suspect I was snooping around. And from what Val and I uncovered in our research, everyone tied to Vanguard has a secret to hide. So, what better way to expose them than to infiltrate their playground?

So far, I've only managed to secure one invitation to the Halloween party, after months of flirting with Montclair. It's reckless, asking him for another, but he's the only one who's been easy to manipulate. I don't know if I should feel proud or ashamed of that.

Once I'm ready, I smooth down the skirt and put on a little lip gloss, feeling more confident with each passing second. This could be it. Tonight might bring us the answers we've been hunting for.

My phone buzzes with a text from Val, asking me to come outside.

I grab my purse, slip on my sneakers, and head out the door.

THE GRANDEUR OF THE WHITMORE ESTATE SWALLOWS ME WHOLE THE moment I step into the foyer. The air feels heavy, laden with an uneasy tension that clings to my skin. My pulse quickens as I glance around, and I catch the faint scent of something sweet—maybe it's the flowers in the grand arrangements, or maybe it's just the overwhelming sense of wealth that fills the space.

I glance over at Valeria, who stands just behind me. Her presence is a constant comfort, even in a place like this. I feel her hand on my shoulder for a moment before she pulls away.

"Well, who do we have here?"

The voice slithers out of the shadows, low and intense. My head snaps to the right, where a man emerges. He's tall and broad-shouldered, with short dark hair and tattoos that snake up from the collar of his shirt and wind down his hands. His brown eyes sweep over me with unsettling focus.

Before we can respond, another man steps forward. He's leaner but just as imposing, with slicked-back hair and brown eyes, his towering frame radiating authority. "Looks like fresh meat," he sneers, his lips curling into a twisted grin before a maniacal laugh escapes him. The sound sends a chill racing down my spine.

Two masks. Identical. Hollow-eyed.

I fight the urge to step back as a third man comes into view. He's different—striking in a way that's hard to ignore. Blond hair perfectly styled. Piercing blue eyes that lock on to me. His suit is sharp and tailored, clinging to his frame like a second skin. Everything about him radiates power and control. My throat tightens just looking at him.

"I've never seen you here before, ladies." His voice is smooth, but there's a coldness beneath it that raises the hairs on the back of my neck. He reaches for my hand, lifting it to his lips, and his touch lingers just long enough to make my skin prickle.

"I'm Theodore Whitmore, but you can call me Theo," he says with a hint of condescension. He gestures to the two men behind him. "These are my brothers, Maxwell and Julian."

"Not *actual* brothers," the leaner one—Maxwell—chimes in, smirking beneath his mask.

Theo turns to him, his tone sharp. "Thanks for the clarification."

Maxwell shrugs, a chuckle escaping him as though he thrives on pushing buttons. Meanwhile, Julian stays silent, his gaze fixed on me. There's something about him—dark and unreadable—that makes it hard to breathe.

"What are your names?" Theo asks, his eyes fixed on me a beat too long. It's unnerving.

My mouth goes dry, and I shift on my feet, willing my voice not to tremble. "I'm Isabel," I manage, gesturing to my side. "And this is Valeria."

Theo's lips curve into a slow, sinister smile. "Welcome to *Latibulum Noctis*," he announces, spreading his arms, as if to embrace the night itself. "Tonight, leave your inhibitions at the door and enter with an open mind. I promise we'll show you a good time."

The words settle in my chest like a stone.

There's nothing casual about his tone that suggests a normal evening.

"Follow me," Theo commands, turning to lead us deeper into the house.

Valeria and I hesitate. My instincts scream at me to leave, but curiosity keeps my feet rooted in place. If there's one thing I know about myself, it's that I can't resist uncovering the truth, no matter how dangerous it may be.

It's what drove me to pursue a career with The Black Quill. Investigative reporting isn't just a job, it's a calling.

As soon as Valeria first told me about Camila and the Whitmores all those years ago, I knew I wanted to dedicate myself to exposing the kind of truths most people are too afraid to face. I was one of the many reasons that shaped my path, transforming a wide-eyed orphan into someone willing to walk straight into the lion's den.

We trail behind the three men, their presence unshakable, but instead of shrinking away, I feel a spark of excitement humming under my skin. My heart races—not just from nerves, but from the thrill of it all. This is what I crave: the rush, the mystery, the chance to dive headfirst into the unknown.

The dimly lit hallway only adds to the drama, with shadows stretching across the walls like something out of a thriller movie. My mind is already cataloging every detail, every sound. I can't help it. I thrive on moments like this, even if they terrify me a little.

As the silence grows louder, I feel the need to speak to shake off the tension. Before I can, Valeria nudges me gently, her shoulder brushing mine. "You were enjoying the attention, weren't you?"

Busted.

I shrug, my lips curling into a mischievous smile. "Maybe."

"You little slut," she murmurs with a chuckle.

"Hey, I'm here for a good time, not a long time," I reply, heat rising to my cheeks.

Her teasing falters for a moment as she tugs me closer. "As long as you promise to be safe."

"Yes, Mommy," I tease, flashing a grin. The nickname started as a joke. Val's always been overprotective, so it felt fitting.

She groans, rolling her eyes. "Oh my God. Are you ever going to stop with that shit?"

"Nope!"

"Whatever. Just remember, if we get separated and you need help, text me our code word," Valeria says, her expression serious.

Butterfly. Val picked it years ago because butterflies have always meant something to her.

"Yes, I'll make sure to pull out my phone and text you while I'm being murdered," I retort, trying to keep my tone light, though my stomach twists with unease.

Her steps falter, and she grabs my arm, her grip tight. "Isabel Lucia Soto," she hisses. "Be serious for two fucking seconds."

The use of my full name makes me wince. “Fine, fine. I’ll make sure to reach out if anything looks sketchy.”

She exhales, her shoulders relaxing slightly, but I can still see the worry etched into her features.

As we step further into the mansion, my pulse quickens, the anticipation building with each step. I don’t know what’s waiting for me tonight, but one thing is certain: I’ve already crossed the threshold, and there’s no going back.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

MAXWELL

When we step into the grand hall, we're the last ones to arrive. Fashionably late, as always.

We split from Isabel and Valeria and head to the far end of the room, where Lionel is already basking in his own glory.

I roll my eyes—dramatically, of course—as his spine straightens and his "showtime" smile takes center stage. It's almost insulting how much he enjoys this pretense. The man loves a spotlight more than I do, and I'm the one born to entertain.

As I let my gaze sweep the room, I catch sight of the group of women I was charming earlier. The one with lips that look like they've been pumped full of helium winks at me. My skin crawls. She probably thinks I'm interested.

Not tonight, sweetheart. I'm selective about where I place my cock.

My gaze continues its leisurely journey until it lands on Isabel, looking both out of place and entirely magnetic. She's wearing a skimpy white top and a purple mini skirt that cling in all the right places. For a second—*just* a second—I forget how to breathe. Damn. She looks… fucking edible.

There's a stiffness to her posture, though, like she doesn't belong here. And she doesn't. Not really. But there's something about the way she holds herself—head high, shoulders back—that makes it impossible to look away. It's like she's daring me to underestimate her, and I suddenly want to uncover everything about her. I momentarily think about the gleaming blade of my knife nipping at her skin, goosebumps erupting as she begs for mercy.

Fuck.

My chest tightens, this unfamiliar pull tugging at me. What is this? It's sharp, intrusive, like an itch I can't scratch. I've felt anger, hatred, bitterness—all the good, toxic emotions. But this? This is different. Unwelcome. Dangerous.

I shouldn't want her. She's Theodore's little obsession, a pawn in the Whitmore game. A piece to be moved, used, and discarded. But as I watch her trace the rim of her glass with her fingers, I feel a dark, primal urge rise in me.

Then, she takes a sip, tilting her head back just slightly, and the way her throat moves when she swallows is enough to push me to the edge of madness.

"Stop drooling."

Julian's voice cuts through my thoughts, his tone *almost* teasing and a little unimpressed. He's standing beside me, arms crossed, his ever-judgmental stare locked in place.

I don't answer him right away. I scoop a glass of champagne from a passing waiter's tray and down it in one swift gulp, letting the burn settle in my stomach before I turn to him with a slow, knowing grin.

I twirl on my heel, feigning amusement. "And you're not? Please, *Juju*. I see the sparkle in your eye."

Julian stiffens, his jaw ticking.

Got you.

"Don't start with me," he grunts. "And stop calling me that."

I smirk, shifting closer, just enough for my shoulder to brush his. "I'll call you whatever I like, little brother."

"Maldito pendejo," he mutters under his breath.

He exhales sharply, his lips parting like he has something biting to throw back at me, but then—*she laughs.*

Isabel, radiant under the golden glow of the chandeliers, smiles at something Valeria says. The sound cuts through the air like a blade, straight to the center of my chest. I don't even realize my grip is tightening around the empty champagne flute until Julian moves, his fingers ghosting over my wrist in the subtlest of warnings.

I turn my head just enough to catch the side of his face. His gaze isn't on me, though. It's on her.

A slow, wicked smile stretches across my lips. “Ah, I see how it is.” I lean in just a little more, my voice nothing but a whisper between us now. “Jealous, Julian?”

Finally, his eyes snap to mine, dark and brimming. I can’t help but let my smirk deepen, relishing the way his breath hitches for just a second—barely noticeable, but I *know* him. I know every tell, every hidden glance, every little crack in his perfect control.

“Of her?” he scoffs, recovering fast, but I catch the way his throat bobs, the slight pink at the tips of his ears. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

I chuckle, turning back toward the room, but I don’t miss the way his gaze lingers on me before he looks away.

But I let it go—for now.

Instead, I set my sights on a new distraction. Matteo, one of Madhouse’s more colorful regulars, is lingering near the buffet, stuffing his face with some overpriced canapé.

Perfect.

“Matteo!” I call out, throwing my arms wide as I stride toward him, forcing the tension out of my body and into my usual charm. “You glorious bastard! How are you?”

I clap him on the back harder than necessary, grinning like I don’t have a care in the world. It’s a lie, of course, but lying is practically my second language.

THE ROOM IS FILLED WITH THE LOW MURMUR OF CONVERSATION AND THE occasional clink of glassware, a symphony of shallow pleasantries that makes my teeth itch. Lionel stands at the center of it all, his theatrical gestures and saccharine smiles on full display as he schmoozes his audience. Watching him is like observing a poorly written play—the kind where the actors are so desperate for applause, they drown in their own melodrama.

Sigh.

I lean against the wall, swirling the clear liquid in my glass as I half-listen to one of the Whitmore lackeys drone on about some business merger.

Lionel’s voice rises above the rest as he recounts one of his embellished tales. His favorite kind, where he’s both the hero and the genius.

Theatrics run in the family, I suppose. The difference is, I don’t pretend my act is anything more than smoke and mirrors. Father believes in his own bullshit, and that’s what makes him dangerous. It’s also what makes dethroning him more enticing.

I picture it sometimes—ripping that crown right off his head, watching his carefully constructed empire crumble under the weight of his own arrogance. Soon. But for now, I play along, the dutiful son with a charming smile and just enough mischief to keep things interesting.

Boredom creeps in. My fingers drum against the side of my glass as I glance toward Julian, who stands stiffly nearby, his expression carved from stone. When our eyes meet, the tension from our earlier exchange lingers.

His gaze flickers, and I know he’s still thinking about what I said.

I grin, just slightly, just enough to let him know I haven’t forgotten either. His jaw tightens, his fingers flexing at his sides, but he doesn’t look away.

It’s a game we’ve played for years—this push and pull.

Father’s voice rises above the rest, commanding attention as he steps into his role as the night’s master of ceremonies.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” Lionel begins, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. “Welcome to tonight’s gathering. As always, it’s a pleasure to see so many familiar faces… and a few new ones.” His eyes sweep over Isabel and Valeria briefly, and though I can’t see their faces from here, I don’t miss the way Valeria stiffens, her posture going rigid.

“For tonight’s entertainment,” Lionel continues, his tone growing darker, “we have chosen a game both thrilling and exhilarating. I’m sure many of you are familiar with it.” He pauses, milking the silence, his gaze sweeping the room as if he’s a puppeteer tugging on invisible strings. The air grows heavy, anticipation buzzing like static electricity. “We will be playing… hide and seek.”

The words land like a thunderclap, the room collectively holding its breath. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Isabel tense, her earlier calm vanishing. The way her fingers tighten around her glass doesn’t escape me, and I can almost feel the nervous energy radiating from her even from across the room.

Lionel's smile widens, as if feeding off the unease. He lives for this—reveling in the power he holds over everyone here. "The rules are simple. You hide, and when the clock strikes midnight, we seek. But be warned—those who are found… Well, let's just say that's when the real fun begins."

I clench my jaw, the glass in my hand growing warm against my palm. If I didn't know better, I'd think Lionel believed he was some kind of God, his word law, his games gospel. It's nauseating, really. And yet, here we are, playing along like good little pawns.

A memory pulls me back, unbidden and unwelcome. I was fifteen when Lionel came for us—me, Theo, and Julian, three boys plucked from a building that reeked of despair. Theo was the golden boy, the one everyone liked. Julian was the quiet one, always observing, calculating. And me? I was the odd one out.

The other kids didn't know what to do with me. I was too loud, too unpredictable, too… different. They called me weird, unhinged, a freak. I didn't fit their mold, and it pissed them off. At first, it pissed me off too. Then, I learned something: if they wanted me to be the villain, I could be the best damn villain they'd ever seen. I leaned into chaos, made it my armor.

But Julian saw something in me no one else did.

At first, I thought he was just like the others—passing judgment. However, Julian wasn't watching to mock or tear me down. He was studying me, trying to understand me in a way no one else ever had. Somehow, he did.

We got closer in ways I never expected. Where Theo was always half a step ahead, trying to please, Julian was there beside me, matching my pace. He didn't shy away from the edges of me that scared others; he met them head-on, challenging me in ways I didn't know I needed.

Late at night, when the world outside our shared room felt too heavy, we would lie side by side, whispering about the future.

I would feel his breath on my skin, close enough to touch but never quite crossing that invisible line.

There were moments when the lines blurred. Our hands would brush and linger, his gaze would hold mine a second too long.

I swore I could feel the hesitation in him, the same hesitation clawing its way up my throat.

Eventually, we stopped hesitating.

One night, Julian closed the distance. His lips ghosted over mine, uncertain, like he was giving me a chance to pull away, but I didn't.

That night, we crossed the line we'd spent a while toeing. There was no grand declaration, just hands gripping, mouths colliding.

Maybe we were always meant to unravel together. Maybe we were always meant to be more than just brothers in name.

A sharp nudge to my shoulder pulls me out of my thoughts. Theo stands beside me. "You good, Madcap?"

I take a long sip of my drink before answering. "Peachy. Just savoring the delightful company."

Theo doesn't smile, but the corner of his mouth twitches. "We need to be ready."

I scan the room, spotting Isabel near the far side with Valeria. She's trying to look comfortable, but her eyes give her away. She's nervous. Good. Nervous people make mistakes.

For a brief second, she glances toward us, but the moment our gazes meet, she quickly looks away, feigning interest in her drink. She knows we're watching.

"What's the game plan?" I ask under my breath, leaning slightly toward him.

His voice drops even lower, barely audible over the noise. "We play along until midnight. Lionel loves his theatrics, so let him have his show. When the clock strikes twelve, we go for Isabel."

I nod, a grin tugging at my lips. Midnight. It has a certain flair to it, doesn't it?

Julian joins us then, his expression unreadable as always.

Turning to Theo again, I quip, "And what happens if Lionel's "fun" gets in the way?"

His jaw tightens. "We won't let it."

"Stop talking. Focus," Julian says, irritated.

I shrug, tossing my empty glass onto a passing waiter's tray. "Relax, hermano. I'm always focused."

Theo doesn't dignify the comment with a response, and I stifle a laugh, turning to Julian instead. "Ready to play?"

He nods once, curt and businesslike, and I can't help but roll my eyes. Always so serious, my Juju.

With that, we fall into step, walking deeper into the mansion.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

ISABEL

Valeria grips my hand tightly, her palm warm and slightly damp with sweat. I know I should focus on her and the plan we've crafted, but my thoughts keep circling back to the three brothers. Their stares still burn my skin, their gazes crawling over me like a touch I can't escape.

I caught them watching me, and not just a passing glance. It was intense. Hungry.

A part of me is scared, but there's another small, twisted part that feels something else. A thrill, maybe. I shake the thought away, focusing instead on Valeria's presence next to me.

When we were standing in the grand hall, listening to Lionel's speech, as if he were some benevolent king addressing his subjects, I knew exactly who he was. Valeria and I have spent countless hours digging into his life, piecing together the puzzle of his family and their twisted legacy. Every shred of evidence we unearthed pointed to him as the puppet master of something far more sinister than anyone could imagine. We just need to figure out what it is exactly.

"Looks like we're in for a real treat," I whisper to Valeria, my nerves humming like a live wire.

The game Lionel announced might sound harmless, but everything about this house, this family—*this night*—feels wrong.

Mr. Whitmore raises his glass with a smug grin. "To a night of thrills and surprises. May the best hiders win."

Laughter ripples through the crowd, but I feel the tension in the room. I exchange a look with Valeria, her wide eyes mirroring my own unease.

“Do you think we should stick together?” I ask as the guests begin to scatter.

“Definitely,” Valeria replies, her grip on my hand tightening. “We need to stay close and keep an eye out for anything strange.”

We move deeper into the mansion, wandering into what looks like a library, its towering shelves packed with ancient books and strange relics that seem older than time itself. The air is thick with dust, and the faint smell of mildew clings to every particle.

“I’m starting to feel like we’re in one of those old horror films.”

“Please don’t.”

“What? I’m just *saying*. It feels like we’re being hunted. I’ve seen this before,” I joke, though my pulse hasn’t slowed since Lionel’s announcement. “The whole “we’re being hunted in a creepy mansion” vibe? Classic horror trope.”

“Isa,” Valeria groans, rolling her eyes. “Let’s just keep moving and stay out of sight.”

“Okay, Mommy,” I say with a grin, unable to resist.

Her lips twitch, almost smiling, but before she can reply, she grabs a book from a nearby shelf and tosses it at me. I duck, the heavy tome landing with a dull thud on the carpet.

I laugh, my nerves easing for just a moment, though the tension in my chest doesn’t fully disappear.

We weave through the library, past a grand fireplace with a mantle cluttered with bizarre trinkets and framed portraits of ancestors glaring down at us.

“Wait.” I point toward a small door partially hidden behind a massive leather chair. “There.”

Valeria nods, and we slip through, finding ourselves in a narrow passageway. The walls are lined with more portraits, their painted eyes seeming to follow our every move.

This place is creepy as hell.

“This is cozy,” I mutter with sarcasm. “Do you think this is a good place to hide?”

“It’s as good as any,” Valeria replies, trying to sound reassuring. “If anything feels off, we get out of here and regroup.”

I nod, and we huddle together in the cramped space, trying to make ourselves as small and invisible as possible.

I force myself to focus on the plan, not on the lingering sensation of being watched or how Lionel’s grin made my skin crawl.

TIME IS DRAGGING.

I’m curled up against the cold wall, my knees pulled to my chest. My legs are cramping, but I don’t dare move. The air is stale and damp, sticking to my skin and making it hard to breathe. Valeria is right next to me, close enough that I can feel her warmth, but it doesn’t stop the tension buzzing between us. I take a slow breath, trying to steady myself.

The sound of a clock chimes, cutting through the silence.

One. Two. Three…

Each ring sends a shiver down my spine. Twelve chimes. Midnight. The signal.

I reach out, gripping Valeria’s arm as if to anchor myself. “It’s time.” I’m barely able to hear my voice over the pounding in my chest.

Slowly, I push myself up, my legs shaking as blood rushes back into them. Valeria’s fingers fumble as she presses them against the hidden latch, sliding the panel open just enough to peer out. There’s nothing. The room is empty, though shadows stretch across the walls, looking more alive than they should.

I exhale, my breath shaky. My hair falls into my face, brushing Valeria’s arm as I lean forward to check again. Still clear. Relief trickles in, but it’s short-lived.

A sound comes from the distance, growing louder and closer with each second. My breath catches in my throat. The footsteps halt abruptly, and silence descends again. Every nerve in my body screams at me to stay still, but I’m trembling, nonetheless.

The footsteps resume, moving away from us this time.

Fuck. That was close.

“We should stay here a little longer,” Valeria mutters. “Then we’ll head back to the main hall. I need to start looking for clues.”

I swallow hard. My chest feels tight, my pulse still racing. My earlier bravado feels like a distant memory. The confidence I clung to now feels like a cruel joke, slipping further away with every passing second.

Then, a group of masked men strides past us, and my stomach twists violently when I catch the glint of metal in their hands—knives, long and wickedly sharp.

What the hell?

They aren't just playing a game. They're *hunting*.

A gasp slips out of me before I can stop it, and I clamp a hand over my mouth, but it's too late. One of the men halts mid-step, his head turning slowly toward us.

My blood runs cold.

It's Theodore.

Even behind the mask, I can see the faint sneer curling his lips. His eyes sweep the area, lingering just long enough to make my skin crawl. I press myself against the wall, willing myself to disappear.

Theodore shrugs after a moment, turning back to the others. They continue down the corridor, their footsteps fading unnaturally fast. They shouldn't have disappeared so quickly. The corridor ahead is long and straight—there's nowhere for them to go.

"Val…" Something's wrong.

"What the hell?" she whispers.

Before I can process it, one of the brothers reappears, stepping from the shadows like a phantom. His hand clamps down on my arm, and I scream, the sound tearing out of me before I can stop it.

"Isabel!" Valeria's voice is sharp with panic, but I can barely register it.

Theodore's grip is like iron, unyielding as he drags me forward. I kick and thrash, trying to break free, but it's no use. His strength is inhuman, as though no amount of struggling could make him falter.

"Let her go!" Valeria shouts, her voice cracking as she lunges for me. Her fingers brush mine, but the other two brothers emerge, each grabbing one of my legs.

"No! Isabel!" Valeria cries, but her voice is drowned out by the pounding of my heart.

I fight harder, my movements frantic, but it only seems to amuse them. Their grip doesn't falter.

"Why aren't you taking me too?" Valeria's voice echoes behind us.

But they don't answer. They don't even look back.

My screams fade into silence as they drag me deeper into the darkness.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

ISABEL

There has to be a way out of this.

Three men, all stronger than me, with God-knows-what kind of intentions. I can't overpower them, and they clearly have a thirst for blood. *My* blood.

Maybe I can outsmart them.

My brain is working overtime, ideas colliding and shattering before I can even grasp them. The panic clawing at my throat doesn't help.

I thrash in their grip, wild and desperate, but it's pointless. Their hands are made of steel.

One of them chuckles darkly. "There's no point in fighting, Isabel." I can't tell who it is—Maxwell? Theodore? Julian? The buzzing in my head drowns out almost everything.

Each attempt to free myself only seems to amuse them, as if I'm nothing more than a mild inconvenience. "You're wasting your energy."

That only makes me fight harder, my nails clawing at their wrists. My chest heaves with exertion, but no matter how much I struggle, I'm no match for them.

"Keep fighting," a dark voice murmurs. "I like the fire in you."

A shiver races down my spine, equal parts fear and anger. I grit my teeth, trying to mask the panic threatening to consume me. "You're going to regret this," I hiss, though the quiver in my voice betrays my bravado.

The men's laughter echo in my ears. They are enjoying this far too much.

“Oh, I doubt that,” one says, his grip tightening just enough to make my breath hitch.

“Let. Me. Go!” I scream, my voice echoing back at me in the stillness of the corridor. I hope someone hears me. Maybe Valeria is close by and will come tearing in, armed with one of her ridiculous ideas that somehow always works. But deep down, I know the truth: no one is coming.

Another laugh cuts through my thoughts, this one crueler. “Oh, this is going to be so much fun.”

“Fuck you,” I spit.

My body goes slack in their grip, defeated for now. They carry me like I weigh nothing, my limbs dangling like a ragdoll. I hate that I’ve lost the strength to resist.

It’s so dark in the passageway, I can barely see ahead. Then, just as a faint sliver of light appears, rough fabric is shoved over my head.

No.

No, no, no.

The world around me disappears, replaced by the scratchy heat of the bag pressing against my nose and mouth. My breathing spirals.

Calm the hell down, or you’re going to pass out—or worse, suffocate yourself.

But it’s impossible to fight the panic curling tighter and tighter in my chest, wrapping its icy hands around my lungs.

Are they trying to kill me?

As if reading my spiraling thoughts, one of them speaks up, his tone mocking. “Relax, Isabel. We’re not going to smother you to death.”

How fucking reassuring.

My chest tightens even more, and the panic doesn’t let up. My inhales are sharp, my pulse thundering in my ears.

“Please, just let me go,” I croak. “I don’t know what you want. I have nothing to offer you!” I thrash again, uselessly. Their hands stay locked on me like a vice, and my struggles only earn a low chuckle from one of them.

Then, out of nowhere, a gust of cool air hits me, brushing against my sweat-damp skin. The sudden change in temperature makes me shiver, goosebumps erupting all over my body.

Are we… outside?

The realization sets my heart racing even faster. I can now feel the ground beneath my feet, but my head is spinning too fast to focus.

They drag me forward, their shoes crunching against the dirt, until we come to a halt. The motion jerks me roughly, and my knees threaten to buckle, but they don't loosen their grip.

Without warning, the bag is ripped off my head. I inhale sharply, gulping down fresh oxygen like I've been underwater for hours. My vision swims as I blink rapidly.

The first thing I see is the mansion behind me, its towering silhouette stark against the night sky. My stomach twists at how far we've come—too far for anyone inside to hear me scream.

When I turn back, my heart sinks. Trees surround us in every direction, a dense forest that stretches endlessly, and standing between me and any hope of escape are the three brothers, their figures cloaked in shadow.

When I see them—really see them, the masks are gone. And for a second, I forget how to breathe. Each of them is absurdly good-looking, in their own distinct way. They're beautiful, and I hate myself for noticing. This isn't the time.

Perhaps I could lose them in the woods, but reality hits me hard: I don't know this property. I'd probably end up running straight into a trap or right back into their hands.

So, I do the next best thing.

I open my mouth, prepared to scream as loud as my lungs will let me, but before I can even draw a breath, Theodore cuts me off.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Ms. *Vale*," he says, his voice calm, like he's used to being obeyed.

The way he says my name sends a chill down my spine.

They know I'm using an alias.

Suddenly, I'm not just another unlucky participant in whatever twisted game this is. I'm a target.

"What do you want from me?" I wrap my arms around myself, desperate for some kind of barrier, no matter how small.

Theodore steps forward, and I instinctively retreat, my eyes wide and fixed on him like he's some predator.

When he's close enough that the space between us feels suffocating, he lifts an arm. For a moment, I think he might hit me, but instead, the back of his hand brushes against my cheek.

I flinch at the contact, but he doesn't pull away. His touch is cold and smooth. My entire body betrays me, shuddering violently under his hand, as

if an electric current just shot up my spine.

“Everything, Siren,” he whispers, his lips so close, I can feel the warmth of his breath on my skin. The nickname catches me off guard, slicing through the moment with an intimacy I wasn’t prepared for. It’s a promise wrapped in a warning.

The heat of his words lingers like an unwelcome embrace. Sensations pool low in my stomach that leave me angry and ashamed.

I try to focus on the terror I *should* be feeling instead of the confusing pull his presence creates.

I need to get away from them—*now.*

The towering trees seem like my only shot, even if I don’t know what lies beyond them. I turn my gaze toward the forest, scanning for any opening to slip away.

Before I can even shift my weight, Theodore’s hand snaps out, gripping my chin and forcing my face back toward him. His fingers press into my skin like he’s staking a claim.

“Now, now, Siren.” His lips twitch into a mocking pout. “You know you wouldn’t get far. Not unless we *let* you.”

I wrench my face out of his grip. “Don’t fucking touch me, Theodore.”

His smile stretches wider, like I’ve just handed him exactly what he wanted. “Say my name again,” he taunts. “With more hate this time.”

Behind him, Julian finally makes a sound—an unimpressed scoff. It’s the first thing I’ve heard from him since they dragged me out here.

Maxwell’s laughter cuts through the tension. “Oh, now you’ve gone and riled him up, Starling,” he drawls, his tone dripping with amusement.

The nicknames send a jolt of anger through me, but I clamp my teeth, refusing to give them the satisfaction of a reaction. My hands curl into fists at my sides as I glare at the three of them.

I force down the panic bubbling in my chest. If I let them see fear, they’ll feed on it. If I’m going to survive this, I can’t afford to give them anything more.

Theodore shakes his head slowly, a smug grin curling his lips. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll give you a chance to run through the forest. If you make it out, we’ll let you go. If you don’t...” He trails off, his eyes glinting with something dark and wicked. “We get to keep you.”

My heart stutters in my chest, his words sending a cold rush through my veins. A chance to run? This has to be a trap. It *feels* like a trap.

I narrow my eyes at him, trying to gauge his angle. “You’re just going to let me go?”

Theodore nods. “If you’re able to find a way out of the forest, yes,” he says with a casual shrug, as if he’s offering me nothing more than directions to the nearest exit.

My throat suddenly goes dry. My instincts scream at me not to trust him, but what choice do I have?

“What do you mean by ‘you get to keep me?’” I ask, forcing down a hard swallow.

Theodore’s grin widens. “It means our plan continues as usual.”

My stomach twists. “What plan?” I press.

Theodore throws his head back, a cruel laugh escaping his lips. “Such a curious little siren.” He turns to his brothers, and they exchange a series of knowing smiles.

The way they look at each other—like they’re all in on some horrific secret—sends a fresh wave of panic rippling through me.

Theodore doesn’t bother facing me as he speaks again. “You have a ten-second head start.”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

ISABEL

T*en seconds*.

That’s it.

I don’t wait for Theodore to explain further. My body moves on instinct, adrenaline flooding my system as I prepare to bolt.

My legs push off the damp grass, and I’m gone, plunging into the darkness of the forest. My heart slams against my ribcage as the cold night air bites at my skin.

One.

The trees loom above me, skeletal shadows stretching across the ground like twisted fingers. The forest is dense, the underbrush snagging at my ankles as I push through it. I don’t care about the scratches blooming on my skin or the sting of branches whipping against my face. I just need to get away.

Two.

The sound of my heartbeat is thunderous in my ears, drowning out everything else. But then, I hear a distant rustle of leaves. It’s faint, but it’s enough to send my pulse skyrocketing. Are they coming already?

Three.

The earth beneath my feet shifts unpredictably. Roots jut out like hidden traps, and I almost trip over one, stumbling forward. I catch myself just in time, but my momentum falters, and I waste precious seconds finding my balance.

Four.

The forest is alive with sounds—crickets chirping, the distant hoot of an owl, the whisper of the wind weaving through the trees. But underneath it all, I swear, I can hear footsteps.

Five.

I glance over my shoulder, and for a split second, I see nothing but the outline of the mansion in the distance. I force myself to keep going, pushing past my burning legs and the ache in my chest.

Six.

The moonlight filters through the canopy above, casting fractured beams onto the mossy floor. I cling to those small patches of light, letting them guide me forward.

Branches snag at my hair, pulling me back, as if the forest itself is conspiring against me. I tear myself free, biting back a curse. My lungs burn, and every breath feels like fire, but I can't afford to slow down.

Seven.

Eight.

I can feel them. I don't know how, but I can feel them behind me. The weight of their presence presses against my back like a physical force, urging me to run faster.

Nine.

They're coming. My mind reels, frantically searching for a plan, an escape, anything. But the forest is an endless labyrinth of trees and shadows.

Ten.

The crunch of leaves and snapping branches behind me turns into a thunderstorm of movement.

Fuck.

I don't dare look back, but I can hear them—footsteps pounding on the ground, low chuckles carried on the wind. They're toying with me, letting me know they're close.

"You can run faster than that, can't you, Siren?" Theodore's voice cuts through the night, taunting, like he's enjoying every second of this twisted game.

Panic tightens my chest and steals what little breath I have left. I duck beneath a low-hanging branch, the rough bark scraping my arm as I barely make it under. My ankle twists slightly as I land awkwardly, but I force myself to keep going, ignoring the sharp pain shooting up my leg.

The forest opens, revealing a small clearing. For a moment, I hesitate, the openness making me feel exposed, but there's no time to think.

"You're making this fun for us, Isabel," a voice calls out, laced with amusement. "Keep going. Let's see how far you get."

I bite back a scream, tears pricking my eyes as I force my limbs to move faster. My thighs ache and my lungs feel like they're on fire.

"You've got this," I whisper to myself, a feeble attempt at encouragement. "Just keep going. Don't let them win."

I nearly trip over an exposed root, catching myself at the last second. My head spins. I need to find cover, but there's nowhere to go.

A voice drifts through the trees. "Where do you think you're going, Siren?" It's Theodore, but it sounds like he's right behind me.

I spin, heart hammering, but there's no one there, just trees and shadows.

"I can hear your heartbeat, corazón." It's coming from my left—or is it? The sound shifts, slipping around me like smoke.

I turn again. "Stop it!" I scream into the night, but my voice feels swallowed up by the forest.

Maxwell's distinct laugh rings out, and it seems to come from above, as if he's perched in the trees. "Aw, don't be scared, Starling. We just want to play."

My legs tremble, the overwhelming urge to collapse battling the instinct to run. I stagger backward, barely catching myself before tripping over a root.

Why are they doing this to me? The thought rattles through my brain.

What do they want from me?

Ever since Valeria and I started looking into the Whitmores, I've kept my head down, staying in the shadows. I used my pseudonym for everything, but it wasn't enough.

I've been poking around where I don't belong, digging into the family and the secrets they've buried for decades. I thought I was being clever, outsmarting them. God, how stupid could I be?

I was bound to be caught eventually, wasn't I?

My stomach twists as a new fear takes hold. If they've come for me, what about Valeria? Is she safe? My pulse quickens as the thought hits me like a slap to the face. If they're after me, they could be going after her too.

Oh God, Valeria.

“Do you think she knows where she’s going?”

Maxwell’s laugh follows. “I doubt it. She’s just running blind. Poor thing.”

I grind my teeth, anger bubbling up alongside the fear. “Fuck you!”

Branches slap against my arms and face, leaving thin, stinging cuts, but I barely notice. All I can focus on is the sound of their pursuit.

“You’ll tire out eventually,” Julian says, almost bored, like he’s certain of how this will end.

“Leave me alone!” I shout, desperate for this chase to end.

“Oh, but you don’t want us to leave you alone, do you?” Theodore’s voice slithers into my ears, and I can practically feel the warmth of his breath against my cheek.

My fingers curl into fists, nails digging into my palms as I try to steady myself. My mind is racing, a jumble of panic.

“We’re everywhere, Starling. There’s no escaping us.”

The words send a shiver down my spine, and I start running again, the panic clawing at my chest making it impossible to breathe.

“Faster, Siren!” Theodore calls out, his voice ringing through the forest like a predator’s growl, and I can almost feel his presence right behind me.

I dart left, then right, weaving between the trees, but their voices follow me, swirling around me like a tornado.

“You can’t hide from us,” Julian taunts, and the sound seems to come from everywhere at once, pressing against my ears, my skull, my entire body.

My thoughts spiral as I push forward, my eyes scanning desperately for any sign of a way out.

They’re playing with me. This is all a game to them. A hunt.

A maniacal laugh rings out. “She’s determined, isn’t she? It’s adorable.”

My throat tightens, and tears prick at the corners of my eyes.

Then, silence.

Where are they?

My eyes dart through the darkness, scanning the trees.

“You’re making this too easy, Isabel.” It comes from somewhere to my right, but when I turn, I see nothing.

I stagger back, my hand flying out to steady myself against a tree.

“Don’t stop now, Starling,” Maxwell’s voice joins in, closer this time. “We were just starting to have fun.”

A rustle behind me.

I spin, but before I can react, a hand shoots out of the darkness and clamps around my wrist.

“No!” I scream, thrashing against them, but it’s useless. Theodore steps into view, his face shadowed but unmistakable.

“There you are, my siren.”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

OceanofPDF.com

A few weeks later

The car weaves through the chaos of the city center, slipping unnoticed past throngs of pedestrians and an endless stream of traffic.

I sit in the back seat, fingers tapping against the leather armrest. My phone is pressed to my ear, listening to the man on the other end drone on about numbers, projections, and potential outcomes, but my patience is wearing thin.

“That’s enough,” I bark, cutting through the excuses. “I don’t care about setbacks. I care about results. Deliver, or I’ll find someone who can.”

I lean back into the seat, stretching my legs out as the car rounds a curve.

“I’ve heard enough for now. Follow up with the legal team and send me the final draft. I’ll look it over.”

This business venture has potential, but it’s not where my mind needs to be tonight. Vanguard awaits, tucked away in plain sight in the heart of the Ebonridge. It doesn’t stand out; that’s the point. It’s buried beneath layers of anonymity, its true nature obscured behind an unremarkable façade.

“I’m not in the habit of repeating myself,” I add, my voice cold. “You have until the end of the week.” The faint ache at the back of my skull intensifies. “I don’t have the luxury of patience, so figure it out.”

Without waiting for a response, I end the call and drop the phone onto the seat beside me.

The town hums around us, oblivious to the weight of the meeting I’m about to walk into, the first gathering since Father’s death. I flex my fingers, releasing the tightness in my knuckles.

Tonight, I will be sworn in as the new patriarch, the title I’ve been groomed for since the day Lionel Whitmore decided I was worth more than to be a ward of the state. It’s the culmination of everything I’ve worked for, everything I’ve sacrificed. And yet, a bitter taste lingers on my tongue.

It’s too soon.

My jaw tightens.

Lionel’s death left a hole, and the legacy demands someone to fill it. It has to be me—it was always going to be me. I should be pleased—*I deserve this*—but the timing is all wrong.

Truth is, Lionel's death was too sudden. I needed him alive a little longer to clean up the pieces, to transition power smoothly.

Mathis, my driver, pulls the car to a stop at a red light, and for a moment, the silence in the cabin feels suffocating. I gaze out the window, catching my reflection—sharp suit, sharper eyes, a reflection Lionel would've approved of. I shouldn't give a shit about what he thinks anymore.

My adoptive father, the man who built an empire out of shadows and lies, whose presence once filled every corner of Vanguard with silent authority, is nothing more than ashes.

And not by my hand.

That thought sticks to my skin, sharp as broken glass. The fire wasn't part of the plan—not *our* plan, anyway. It should have been *my* move, my decision, but someone else played their hand first.

Camila, or Verónica, as she calls herself now, made sure to have the upper hand.

She was my adoptive sister, a Whitmore before she was a ghost. When she disappeared, we were forbidden to question the convenient story we were fed, and I was too hungry for Lionel's approval to dig deeper. Her absence was a mystery we learned to ignore, but I can't any longer.

She's back.

The fire didn't just destroy the old mansion; it kicked over a hornet's nest of secrets. Camila—the sister we thought we lost—is *alive*.

She stepped out of the past, seizing control in the most destructive way possible.

I don't know whether to admire her nerve or despise her recklessness. She stormed in after years of silence and tore down the foundations Lionel built, leaving the rest of us to pick up the pieces.

I lean back in my seat, closing my eyes for a moment. Verónica is out there somewhere, laying low, likely laughing at the irony of her adoptive brothers scrambling in the aftermath of her chaos.

When the time comes, we'll need to talk about her future, what she wants and whether it aligns with what we need. This family name isn't something you walk away from.

The Whitmore estate is quieter than ever now that the mansion has been reduced to dust. The investigation into the fire has concluded, and while Ebonridge PD suspected foul play, I convinced them it was an accident.

Obviously, it wasn't, but I'd rather them not dig deeper and uncover Valeria and Verónica's involvement.

Selfishly, I want something to hold over their heads when I finally confront them. My adoptive sister was very hard to find, a skilled hacker herself. I guess it runs in the family. Still, I found her. She's living in an apartment just outside of town with Valeria.

Mathis slows the car as we near Vanguard. From the outside, it looks like a nondescript office building tucked between a bank and a high-end boutique.

The entrance is as unassuming as ever—a simple doorway nestled between two faceless buildings, the kind of place you'd walk past a hundred times without ever noticing.

We pull into the underground parking garage, the sound of the engine echoing off the concrete walls as we descend. Finally, we come to a stop near an elevator tucked into the far corner.

"You'll wait," I say without looking at Mathis.

"Yes, sir."

I step out, the sharp scent of oil and exhaust biting at my nose. Adjusting my cufflinks, I make my way to the elevator. The doors slide open with a soft chime, and I press my thumb to the biometric scanner.

The sudden buzz of my phone cuts through the quiet. I glance at the screen and smirk when I see Julian's name flash across it.

"Yes?" I answer as I lean against the wall.

Julian's exasperated sigh comes through the line, followed by the unmistakable sound of something shattering in the background. "She's at it again."

I don't need to ask who.

A muffled voice cuts through, shrill and furious. "You're all psychopaths! Sick, twisted assholes!"

A chuckle rumbles out of me before I can stop it. "What's she doing now?"

"She won't eat," Julian growls. "I tried everything. Brought her food, left it in the room, even threatened to let Maxwell cook for her, but nothing works. She's acting like a goddamn feral cat."

"She's stubborn. You can't fault her for that."

"Fault her? I'm about to throw her out the damn window."

In the background, Isabel's voice rises again. "I hope you choke on your own arrogance, you pretentious jackass!"

That makes me outright laugh. "She's got a mouth on her."

"No shit," Julian snaps. "I'm not calling for commentary, Theodore. What the hell do I do?"

I step out of the elevator, adjusting the lapels of my jacket. "Figure it out yourself. You're a grown man, aren't you?"

Julian's response is a string of cuss words in Spanish, rapid-fire and biting. He ends the call before I can retort, leaving me grinning like an idiot in the middle of Vanguard's black marble hallway.

I can't help but admire her fire. It's not every day that someone dares to stand their ground against a Whitmore.

Since the moment we took Isabel, she has been nothing but a storm, impossible to ignore.

She hurls insults like knives, snapping at us any chance she gets, her fury burning hotter with each passing day. She refuses to eat more than a few bites and makes damn sure we *know* she's rejecting everything we give her, knocking over trays, spitting venom with every word.

She calls us cowards, monsters. When we try to ignore her, she gets even louder, demanding answers, demanding freedom, never letting up.

She clings to her anger like it's armor, keeping us at a distance with sharp glares.

Most people in Isabel's position would be broken by now, worn down by fear or desperation, but not her.

Even when exhaustion tugs at her, when I can see the hunger gnawing at her, she doesn't cave. It's infuriating.

It would be easier if she broke. If she cowered. If she let fear swallow her whole.

But Isabel doesn't know how to kneel. *Yet.*

I walk down the hall, toward the double doors ahead.

When I push them open, I'm immediately hit by the stifling heat of the room. It's full of men already in their masks and cloaks, and my stomach churns at the sight. They look fucking ridiculous, every single one of them. I can't believe I have to wear that damn thing too.

It's just all so beneath me.

I don't even bother with pleasantries. I lock eyes with one of the waiters and snap, "Scotch. Now." The tension is crawling up my spine, and I need

something to take the edge off before I lose my cool.

The chatter around me fades as one of my father's old associates sidles up with a fake smile, offering his condolences. "I'm sorry for your loss, Theodore. Lionel was a good man." His voice drips with insincerity, and I can't help but want to roll my eyes.

"Thank you," I say, forcing out the words. I don't care. It's all just an act. His words don't even register with me. I shake his hand because it's expected, but that's where it ends.

Before I can escape, another man approaches, his tone overly enthusiastic. "I'm excited to see what the new generation of Whitmores will do. I'd love to meet with you and discuss some opportunities."

My fists tighten. They don't care about legacy or the family. They just want to use it to line their own pockets, to claw their way up. I nod, my mind already elsewhere, already tired of the show.

Then, I see Maxwell, and I freeze for a second, my eyes narrowing.

He's dressed like he just stepped out of some fever dream. Leather pants, snug and black. A distressed shirt probably meant to be edgy, the holes too wide, showing off the tattoos creeping up his chest. There's a silver chain draped around his neck, the star pendant swinging with every movement—a new addition he only started wearing after we captured Isabel. His boots are polished but untied, like he couldn't be bothered.

It's exactly what you'd expect from Maxwell.

I can't help myself. "What the fuck are you wearing?"

Maxwell just shrugs, a stupid grin on his face. "I'm going to Madhouse after this. Didn't feel like changing," he says casually, as if he's not completely out of place in the crowd.

This fucking guy.

I can feel my eyes twitching as I watch him saunter through the room like he owns it. I take a slow, controlled breath. This whole fucking evening is already getting out of hand.

As if the night hasn't tested me enough, I'm handed the patriarchal cloak. It feels heavier than I thought it would, like it's suffocating me before I even put it on. The dark velvet is thick and oppressive, and the golden threads running through it catch the light just enough to make it feel like it's more of a symbol of power than any of the men in the room. The moment it settles on my shoulders, I can feel the weight of every expectation.

I force down the irritation clawing at my ribs.

The head priest steps forward. “It’s time, Theodore. Join me at the altar.”

The room falls quiet as I approach the front of the room. Everyone’s eyes are on me, and it feels like a thousand invisible hands pressing down on my chest, each one trying to see if I’m worthy of what they think is mine.

“Place your right hand on the altar, Theodore Whitmore,” the priest intones.

I put my palm on the cold stone, and I feel a small tremor shake through me.

The priest hovers the silver symbol of our bloodline over me.

At its center, a bold, interlocking W and V are carved deep into the metal, the edges elongated into claw-like extensions that stretch out, almost like talons. Encircling the letters, thin, winding etchings resemble the twisting roots of a tree. Small, dagger-like points extend from the outer ring, a silent promise of bloodshed.

I can feel the weight of the priest’s words as he begins the chant. The words are ancient, wrapped in power I don’t fully understand. It’s a part of the ritual, but something about it still makes my skin prickle.

“The Whitmore legacy runs deep, and you, Theodore, are the next to carry that line. You are the one chosen to bear the mantle of patriarch, the one who will lead us through the future, through the trials of our past.” The priest’s voice drops to a whisper, his hand lowering to grip my wrist. The cool press of metal meets my skin before searing heat erupts against my flesh.

I grit my teeth as the silver brand digs into the soft skin of my inner wrist, the sharp scent of burning flesh curling into the air. The pain is white-hot, spreading through my veins like fire, but I refuse to flinch.

The seal of the Whitmore family burns into my skin.

The priest finally pulls away, and the pain dulls to a deep, insistent throb. The mark is there now, forever, Father’s claim etched into me like I’m nothing more than property. But this legacy belongs to *me*.

“With this mark, you are bound to this family. May the blood of our ancestors guide you. May the power of our name give you strength.”

I grit my teeth against the pressure building behind my eyes, against the surge of power filling the air. It’s too much.

When he steps back, I pull my hand from the altar.

The priest bows his head, and the rest of the room follows suit. The formalities are over.

I'm the patriarch now.

Maxwell's voice cuts through the air like a goddamn dagger. "So you're the king now, huh?" His grin is wide.

I don't respond.

I turn, meeting the gaze of the men in the room. Some of them look away while others hold my stare, probably already calculating what they think they can get from me. I can practically hear their thoughts—how they'll try to manipulate and use me.

I'm not the naïve boy I once was.

I won't be their puppet.

Not now. Not ever.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

The meeting is over, but the weight of it still lingers.

As I get ready to step into the house I share with my brothers, tension winds through my muscles like a coiled spring. After the phone call I had with Julian earlier, I have no idea what I'm walking into, but I know better than to expect peace.

The scent of burnt wood and old books lingers in the air as I shut the door behind me. The house is quiet, save for a buzzing cutting through the silence.

I follow the sound into the living room, where Julian is seated on one of the leather armchairs, a tattoo machine humming in his hand. His wrist is braced against his knee, steady despite the fresh ink bleeding into his skin.

I scoff. "Are you serious?"

Julian doesn't even glance up. "Needed to relieve some stress."

He dips the needle back into the ink, dragging it through his skin with precision.

I fold my arms, eyeing him. "Since when do *you* need to relieve stress?"

He exhales through his nose. "Since Isabel started driving me insane."

That makes me pause. It takes a lot to shake Julian, and I can count on one hand the number of times I've seen him lose his composure. If she managed to rattle him, she must have really outdone herself.

I tilt my head. "Where is she?"

"Locked her in the basement."

Ah. So that's why I can't hear her.

I don’t say anything; I just turn on my heel and make my way down the hall, descending the narrow staircase to the basement. The moment I slip the key into the lock and twist; all hell breaks loose. The door swings open, and Isabel’s voice crashes into me like a hurricane.

“You *sick* bastards! You think locking me up is going to break me? *Try harder!*” Her voice is raw, like she has been yelling for hours. “I swear to God, the second I get out of here, I’m burning this whole damn place to the ground!”

I lean against the doorframe, taking in the sight of her—wild-eyed, pacing like a caged animal, fists clenched at her sides.

“Well, well. You’re feisty tonight.” I drag my gaze over her. “Guess I should be flattered. You missed me that much?”

I barely have time to register the shift in her stance before she lunges.

Her fist connects with my face, knocking my head to the side with the force of it. A sharp sting blooms across my lip, the metallic tang of blood filling my mouth.

For a second, all I hear is my own breath as I straighten. I lift my hand, swiping my thumb over my lip, feeling the warm, wet smear of red.

Isabel stumbles back, shocked, as if she can’t believe she actually did it. For the first time since we took her, she’s quiet.

She’s scared.

A slow grin spreads across my face. I press my thumb past my lips, tasting the sharp tang of my own blood, my eyes locked onto hers the entire time.

“Oh, you *really* messed up, Siren.”

Her fingers twitch at her sides like she wants to hit me again, but she doesn’t. She holds still, her mouth parting like she might say something, but nothing comes out.

Something dark and hungry stirs inside me at the sight.

That brief moment when she doesn't know if she should fight or flee, when the fire in her eyes dims, just for a second, before she smothers it with sheer will.

I take a step forward, and she instinctively takes one back.

Interesting.

I lick my lips, letting my gaze drop to her mouth before dragging it back up to meet her eyes. My pulse is steady, but something low in my gut tightens at the memory of her fists, the sharp crack of pain that came with it.

“Nothing to say?” I taunt, taking another step, watching her throat bob as she swallows. “That’s a first.”

Isabel backs up until her shoulders press against the cold stone wall.

There’s nowhere to run.

She’s still breathing fast, her chest rising and falling in shallow bursts, but she hasn’t broken eye contact. Her defiance burns bright, refusing to be snuffed out. I take my time, tilting my head, watching her.

“Kneel.”

Her body tenses. “Go to hell,” she quivers.

I expected as much.

“I’ll ask again.” I take a step closer, keeping a few feet between us. “Kneel.”

Her chin lifts. “No.”

My jaw ticks. I shouldn’t be surprised, but something about her stubborn refusal sets a slow, simmering heat in my blood. She’s playing a dangerous game.

My hand shoots out, fingers tangling in her hair as I yank her down. She gasps, her knees hitting the floor with a sharp *thud*. Her hands fly up, gripping my wrist, nails scratching at my skin as she hisses in pain. She twists, trying to break free, but I tighten my grip, forcing her head back so she has no choice but to look up at me.

A flash of uncertainty washes over her eyes.

Good.

“You want to rethink that answer, Siren?”

Her jaw clenches, her lips pressing into a thin line. She tugs at my grip again, stubborn even now. *Stupid girl.*

“You just don’t learn, do you?”

I bring my hand down in a sharp strike. The impact is instant as my palm connects with her cheek, snapping her head to the side. A gasp leaves her lips, and a flush of deep red blooms across her skin.

She stays still for a moment, her breath uneven, her lashes fluttering as if stunned, but there’s no fear in her eyes.

Instead, her lips part and her pupils widen—just a little too much.

My fingers flex around the strands of her hair as I tip her face back up, forcing her to meet my gaze.

Isabel stares at me, then, like a true little menace, she spits at my feet.

I let out a short laugh, but there’s no humor in it, only disbelief.

“God, you’re a fucking brat.”

I slap her again, harder this time.

Her head snaps to the side, her chest heaving, and when she finally lifts her eyes back to mine, her lips are curled into the faintest hint of a smirk.

She fucking likes this.

She’s *taunting* me now, daring me to keep going.

I drag my knuckles over her swollen cheek, feeling the heat radiating from where my palm met her skin. My pulse is steady, but deep down—underneath all the control—I know exactly what’s happening.

She’s getting off on this. And the worst part?

So am I.

I let the silence stretch before finally speaking. “Are you finally going to behave?”

Isabel lets out a sharp laugh. “Go fuck yourself. I’d rather die than respect scum like you.”

I sigh. “You really don’t know when to quit.”

Before she can blink, my hand moves again, faster this time. The slap lands hard. A sharp hiss rushes through her teeth, and when she looks back at me, there’s renewed heat in her eyes.

I drag my tongue over my teeth, my jaw flexing. As much as I’d love to unzip my slacks and push my cock in her pretty mouth, putting it to better use, I remind myself she’s dealing with the new head of Vanguard now. This isn’t a game anymore. I deserve respect.

And she’s going to give it to me.

I release her, stepping back. For a moment, she doesn’t move, blinking in confusion. I move across the room, opening a drawer and pulling out a thick iron chain. When I turn back, her eyes are wide.

“W-Wait,” she stammers. “Don’t—please. You don’t have to do this. Please.”

I smirk, letting the chain dangle between my fingers, enjoying the way her breath shudders. “You beg so prettily, my siren.” I tilt my head. “Shame it’s not for my cock.”

She stumbles back, but there’s nowhere to go. I close the distance, catching her wrists and securing them together.

Her skin is warm beneath my fingers, her pulse frantic against the metal binding her. She shakes her head, struggling, but she’s not getting out of this.

I grab a chair and force her down onto it. The chains rattle as I fasten her in place, looping them tight against the wooden frame.

I crouch beside her, dragging a knuckle along the line of her jaw. “Until you learn to respect me, you’re staying right here,” I murmur, letting the promise settle between us. “Unless, of course, you decide to cooperate.”

She swallows hard, her throat bobbing. “Cooperate with what, exactly?”

I pace the room as Isabel flexes her wrists against the restraints. She’s testing them, but she won’t get far.

“We need your assistance.”

“Assistance?” she repeats, wary.

I nod. “You work for The Black Quill. That makes you valuable.” I stop pacing and look down at her. “We need a series of articles exposing our dear father for what he really was. Corrupt. A man unworthy of the power he wielded.”

She scoffs, shifting in the chair. “And you think I’d help you with that?”

“I think you’ll see reason.”

“Destroy my integrity for *you*? Get involved in whatever bullshit *this* is? Not a chance.”

Her defiance doesn’t surprise me one bit.

“This isn’t just about your father, is it?” she adds, tilting her chin up. “I know the Vanguards had something to do with Camila’s murder.”

I can see it in her face the second she realizes her mistake.

“You know about Camila?” My voice is almost curious, but I see the way she shrinks just a little, like she wants to take it back.

I let the silence stretch just long enough to make her squirm before I laugh.

“I know you’ve been digging, Isabel. You and your dear friend Valeria. How do you think she found those monitors in the basement in the first place?” I grin. “I *led* her straight to them.”

Isabel stares at me, processing my words.

“The plan was always for us to eliminate Lionel,” I continue, stepping closer. “But lucky for us, Valeria and my long-lost adoptive sister did it for us.” I crouch in front of her, my hands on my thighs. “So now, we shift gears.”

Isabel’s face twists in confusion, her brows knitting together. Something about my words isn’t clicking for her. “Camila is dead.”

I smirk. “Is she?”

She blinks, trying to process. “She’s *alive*?”

I click my tongue. “Oh, *Isabel*, you’ve missed so much while you were gone.”

Her expression snaps from shock to fury in an instant. “Fuck you. Why did you kidnap me in the first place?”

“It doesn't matter now.”

Her frustration builds. “It *does* matter.”

“No.” I stand to my full height. “It doesn’t.”

She glares at me, but she’s not just mad—she’s desperate. She wants the truth, and I’m enjoying making her wait.

I ignore her request and continue pacing the room.

“Now that I’m head of Vanguard, I need to ensure the council is on my side.” I glance at her over my shoulder. “Unfortunately, they still see Lionel as this great, honorable leader. A *visionary*.” My lips curl with disgust. “But you and I both know the truth, don’t we?” I exhale sharply, turning to face her fully. “I want the world to see him for what he really was. A fraud. A monster. A man who built an empire on blood and shadows.” I step closer, tilting my head. “And you, *reporter*, are going to help me do it.”

Isabel scoffs, rolling her eyes. “Oh, so now you’ve grown a conscience, huh? What, just because your father’s dead, you suddenly care about right and wrong?”

I chuckle bitterly, invading her space, not giving her a moment to breathe. “No, you’ve got it all wrong, Siren. I’ve always been a bad man. Nothing—*nothing*—will ever erase the blood on my hands.” I inch closer, my presence towering over her. “Don’t mistake me for someone seeking redemption. I just want what I *deserve*.”

“And what is that?”

I don’t hesitate. “Recognition. My rightful place on the throne”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

JULIAN

OceanofPDF.com

THE PAST: *St. Dismas Home For Boys*

Everything feels too big.

I clutch the straps of my too-big backpack as tightly as I can, my hands trembling.

The cab ride from the city felt like it lasted forever, the world outside growing gloomier the closer we got to St. Dismas' Home for Boys.

Now, standing at the tall, rusted gates, I feel swallowed whole by the sight of the towering gray building. It's like something out of the scary stories Mama used to tell me, with its pointed rooftops and windows that look like empty, staring eyes.

My throat burns as I fight back tears. *No llores, Julian. Don't cry.*

The woman who brought me here—a social worker whose name I've already forgotten—nudges me forward gently. "Come on, sweetheart. They're waiting for you."

The gates groan as they open, and I step through, my sneakers scuffing against the cracked stone path. A man in a black sweater, his face wrinkled and pale, greets us at the door. He introduces himself as Father Calloway, the head of the orphanage. His voice is soft, like he's trying not to scare me, but it doesn't help. Nothing about this place feels safe.

The social worker leans toward him, lowering her voice to a whisper. I fixate my eyes on the floor, pretending not to notice, but her words still reach me.

"This is Julian. He's six, recently orphaned. His mother was killed just over a week ago. The horror, Father. He saw everything."

I grip the straps of my backpack tighter, the plastic cutting into my palms.

"He doesn't speak much English," she continues. "Just enough to get by, but he's very quiet. Withdrawn. I don't think he's said more than a few words the entire time I've been with him."

My cheeks feel hot. I understand every word she says. Even though English still feels like a puzzle I can barely piece together, I know enough.

Father Calloway nods. "Poor boy," he murmurs. Then, he turns to me, his expression kind. "Welcome, Julian. You're safe here."

Inside, the hallways are dark. I can hear laughter echoing from somewhere deeper in the building, probably other boys who live here. I

catch glimpses of a group huddled together in a corner, but they don't notice me.

"This will be your home for now," Father Calloway says as he leads me to a small room at the end of the hall. "We'll make sure you're looked after."

The room is tiny, with plain white walls and a single bed pushed up against the corner. A blanket covers the mattress, and there's a small dresser against the wall. It smells a little like soap. My suitcase, containing the few things I have left, sits at the foot of the bed.

"Thank you, Father," the social worker says before she kneels to my level. "You're going to be okay here, Julian. You'll make friends, and they'll take good care of you."

I don't respond. I only nod.

Father Calloway pats my shoulder gently. "We'll let you settle in. You're welcome to join us in the dining hall when you're ready."

He leaves, and the door clicks shut behind them.

I sit on the edge of the bed, my fingers brushing against the zipper of my backpack, and I pull it open just enough to see the photograph tucked inside—me and Mama at the park, her arm around my shoulders, both of us smiling.

A sob catches in my throat, and I press my hand over my mouth to keep it in.

THAT NIGHT, I CAN'T SLEEP.

The bed feels strange, the air too cold. The other boys' laughter and whispers come through the walls. I curl into a ball, clutching the blanket around me.

Eventually, I drift off.

I see Mama again, walking on the sidewalk, under the yellow light. She's wearing her favorite jacket, the one with the worn-out elbows. Her purse is hanging over her shoulder, her hands gripping the strap tightly as she walks home. The sound of her boots thumping against the pavement echoes in the air.

Then, they appear. The men. Shadows at first. They surround her, yelling words I don't understand. She tries to run, but they grab her, one of them striking her across the face. She falls, her head hitting the ground with a sickening crack.

"Mama!" I scream, but she can't hear me. I try to run to her, but my feet won't move. The scene replays over and over, her body crumpled on the pavement, blood pooling beneath her.

I wake up in a startle, tears streaming down my face. I want her. I want her to hold me and tell me it's just a bad dream, but she's gone.

I'm alone.

I pull the quilt tighter around me and bury my face in my knees.

I'm not sure how long I sit like that before exhaustion finally pulls me under again. But even in my sleep, the ache in my chest doesn't go away. It remains a constant pain that reminds me of everything I've lost.

DAYS TURN INTO WEEKS. WEEKS TURN INTO MONTHS.

Time passes in a way I can't quite measure, each day blending into the next like the smudged pages of my notebook.

Over time, I've found a new normal at St. Dismas. I wake up to the same creaking floors and drafty halls. Eat meals in the crowded dining room where the other boys laugh and joke. Sit outside in the small, overgrown courtyard, where weeds grow through cracks in the pavement.

It's not home, but it's all I have.

I keep to myself mostly, talking only when necessary.

Now, I can speak English fluently—it wasn't so hard once I really started listening. I don't use it much because the more I use English, the more I feel like I'm losing something else.

Spanish is my last connection to Mama. The language sounds like her voice, soft and warm, like the way she used to call me *mi corazón*. I can't let it go.

So, I start writing her letters in Spanish.

In my notebook, the one they gave me when I arrived, I write to her every night before bed. Sometimes, I only write a few lines. Other times, I

fill the whole page. It makes me feel like she's still there, like I can still talk to her.

I randomly open a page.

Dear Mama,

I hope you're okay. I miss you so much. Today, I had oatmeal for breakfast, and it made me think of how you used to make it with cinnamon and sugar. They don't make it like that here, but I remember how you did. I always will.

I tried to draw you again today. I think I got your eyes right this time, but I'm not sure about your smile. It's hard to remember everything, and I hate that I'm forgetting little things about you. I try not to, I promise.

Sometimes, I think about that night. About the bus stop. About how I should've stayed home like you always told me. Maybe if I had, you'd still be here. I know you'd tell me that's not true, but I can't stop thinking about it.

Lo siento, mama.

Voy a portarme bien aquí. Te seguiré escribiendo. Seguiré recordando.

Te quiero. Siempre te voy a querer.

Tu Julian

I fill the rest of the pages with random little sketches.

In the margins, I draw funny faces like the ones Mama used to doodle for me on scraps of paper when I was little. Sometimes, I draw things I see in the courtyard, like birds or stray cats. Sometimes, I draw her.

I don’t want to forget my mother’s face. The soft curve of her cheeks, her bright eyes, the way her hair always looked a little messy after work. Over the years, I’ve drawn her repeatedly.

It’s the only way I know to keep her close. Even if she isn’t here, even if she never would be again, I have the letters and the drawings.

And as long as I have those, I still have her.

The door bursts open without so much as a knock. I sigh, already knowing who it is.

“Do you ever knock?” I groan, snapping my notebook shut and tucking it under my pillow.

Maxwell strides into the room like he owns the place, grinning from ear to ear. He’s tall for his fifteen years, lanky, with a mop of hair that always looks like he just rolled out of bed. His uniform shirt is untucked, one of the buttons missing, and there’s a smear of dirt on his cheek. He looks like trouble. He *is* trouble.

“Why bother knocking when I know you’re here?” he says, plopping down on the foot of my bed like it’s his own.

I cross my arms, leaning back against the wall. “Maybe because it’s *my* room?”

Maxwell shrugs, completely unfazed. That’s the thing about him: he doesn’t take a hint. I can’t tell if he’s genuinely clueless or just doesn’t care. Probably the latter. Either way, it doesn’t matter. He does whatever he wants, whenever he wants, and no amount of sighing or glaring on my part seems to change that.

“Whatcha writing?” he asks, craning his neck toward my pillow like he’s trying to see what I’ve hidden.

“Nothing.”

He raises an eyebrow, clearly not believing me, but thankfully, he doesn’t press. “Well, *nothing* sure seems to keep you busy a lot. Don’t you ever get bored of being all... I don’t know, mysterious?”

“Mysterious?” I snort, shaking my head. “I’m not mysterious, Maxwell. I just don’t talk to people who annoy me.”

“Ouch.” He clutches his chest like I’ve just stabbed him. “That’s cold, Juju. Really cold. Good thing I’m tough.”

I don’t bother responding. Instead, I grab my sketchbook off the nightstand and start flipping through the pages, hoping he’ll take the hint and leave. Of course, he doesn’t.

No matter how much I push him away, he sticks around. He's one of the only people who has tried to be my friend since I got here, and even though I've rarely given him the time of day, he has never given up. It's annoying, and, if I'm being honest, kind of impressive.

"What do you want?" I ask finally, looking up from my sketchbook.

He grins, pleased to have my attention. "We're playing soccer in the courtyard. Thought you might wanna join."

"I don't."

"Come on, don't be such a hermit. You can't stay cooped up here forever. It's not healthy."

I sigh again, pinching the bridge of my nose. Maxwell leans back on his hands, watching me with that stupid, persistent grin on his face.

"Fine," I mutter, closing the sketchbook and sliding off the bed. "Just for a little while."

Maxwell whoops like he just won some grand victory. "Knew you'd come around, man. Let's go!"

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

The halls of St. Dismas are quiet in the evening.

My shoes scuff against the wooden floors as I make my way to the staircase, hands shoved deep in my pockets. The air smells faintly of damp wood and floor polish.

As I pass Father Calloway's office, I hear my name.

I freeze. For a second, I think I imagined it, but then, I hear it again.

I press myself against the wall. The door is slightly ajar, just enough for the glow of the office lamp to spill into the hallway. Slowly, I edge closer, my heart pounding in my ears.

Inside, Father Calloway is speaking to another man—Father Gray, from the sound of it.

"They're interested in Theodore," Calloway says.

I stiffen, my chest tightening. What the hell are they talking about? My stomach twists, and a prickle of unease creeps down my spine.

"They've requested information on him," he continues.

I lean closer, straining to hear every word, my hands clenched into fists at my sides.

"They'll want to meet him soon."

My jaw tightens, and before I can stop myself, I push the door open.

The two priests look up, startled. Calloway's face hardens when he sees me, but I don't care.

"I'm not going," I say, stepping into the room. My chest feels like it's on fire. "Not without Maxwell and Julian."

"Theodore," Calloway starts, "this isn't something you have a say in—"

“I don’t care.” My gaze locks onto his, unflinching. “If they want me, they take all three of us or none of us.”

Calloway’s mouth tightens into a thin line. “That’s not how this works. It’s up to the family to decide who they take, not you.”

“Then make them decide,” I snap, my voice rising. My hands are shaking now, but I keep them at my sides. “Tell them if they want me, they take all three of us. We’re a package deal.”

Calloway exhales heavily and glances at Father Gray, who shrugs as if to say, *Your problem.*

“You’ve been here sixteen years, Theodore,” Calloway says, his voice softer now, almost pitying. “I know you feel a sense of responsibility for those boys, but this decision isn’t yours to make.”

“Sixteen years,” I repeat, my voice cracking. “You’ve seen the others come and go. You’ve seen what happens when you split people up. I’m not going to be another one of those stories, and neither are they. They’re the only family I’ve got, Father. Julian and Maxwell are the only ones who’ve stuck, the only ones who matter.”

The silence stretches as Calloway looks at me, his lips pressed together in a hard line.

Finally, he sighs. “I’ll make the suggestion.”

Relief washes over me, but it’s muted by the weight still pressing on my chest.

“That’s all I’m asking.”

Calloway nods, his shoulders sagging, as if I’ve somehow exhausted him. “Go to your room, Theodore. I’ll handle it from here.”

I nod once and turn to leave.

The priests’ voices resume as I walk away, but I can’t make out what they’re saying. My head is spinning.

Whatever this is, I’m going to get to the bottom of it.

I’ll be damned if I let them take me without Maxwell and Julian.

They’re what has kept me sane in this place.

I’m not leaving them behind.

THE CONVERSATION FROM LAST NIGHT CIRCLES IN MY HEAD LIKE A BUZZARD as I make my way to Maxwell's room.

The idea of someone coming into our lives and ripping us apart makes me sick, and I'm already plotting ways to make sure that doesn't happen.

I reach Maxwell's door and knock once before pushing it open without waiting for an answer.

"Max—"

I stop dead in my tracks.

There, sprawled across his bed, is Elliot, practically draped over Maxwell like a blanket, his head buried in his shoulder, one arm slung lazily across his chest.

"Jesus Christ," I mutter, slamming the door shut behind me.

Maxwell looks up at me with a lazy grin that only makes me angrier.

"Morning, sunshine," he says, his voice rough with sleep. "What's got your panties in a twist?"

"What's got my—" I take a deep breath. "What the hell are you doing, Maxwell? Do you have any idea what would've happened if Calloway or one of the other priests walked in here?"

Maxwell stretches, completely unfazed, and the movement stirs Elliot awake. The boy sits up abruptly, his eyes going wide when he sees me standing by the door with my arms crossed.

"Out," I demand, jerking my chin toward the hallway.

Elliot scrambles out of the bed, tugging his shirt down as he stumbles past me. He doesn't even meet my eyes, just mutters a quick, "Sorry," before darting into the hall.

I turn back to Maxwell, who's now propped up on one elbow, looking entirely too pleased with himself.

"What is wrong with you?"

Maxwell chuckles, running a hand through his messy hair. "Relax, Theo. It's not like we were doing anything scandalous. I got cold, needed some company. What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is, you're not careful. You think you can just do whatever you want without consequences. You're lucky it was me who walked in and not Calloway. Or do you want to explain *this* to him?"

Max smirks. "If it was Calloway, I'd just flash him that innocent smile he loves so much. Works every time."

I scoff, shaking my head. "You're insufferable."

“Maybe.” He stretches again and throws his arms behind his head. “But you love me anyway.”

I ignore the comment, rolling my eyes. “You could’ve snuck into Julian’s room like you always do.”

Max rolls onto his side, propping himself up. “Julian’s been in a mood lately. Didn’t want to deal with it.”

“You idiot. You forgot, didn’t you?”

Maxwell frowns. “Forgot what?”

“The anniversary of his mother’s death is coming up.”

His expression falters, and for once, he looks genuinely guilty. “Shit,” he mutters, sitting up fully. “I—fuck.”

“That’s what I thought. You’re a piece of shit, Maxwell.”

He winces, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, okay, maybe. I’ll fix it. I’ll—”

“Save it,” I cut him off. “Just don’t make it worse.”

Maxwell sighs. “Got it.”

I watch him for a moment longer, waiting to see if he’s going to say anything else. He doesn’t. He just stares down at his hands, looking like he’s mulling over what I said.

“I need to talk to you about something else.”

Max raises an eyebrow, scooting to the edge of the bed. “Oh, great. More bad news?”

I ignore his sarcasm. “Last night, I overheard Calloway and Gray talking. There’s a family asking to adopt me.”

Max blinks. “What? Really?”

I nod, crossing my arms. “They didn’t go into detail, but I told Calloway we’re a package deal.”

Max snorts. “Of course you did.”

“I’m serious, Max,” I snap. “If they try to split us up—”

“They won’t,” Max interrupts, standing up and stretching. “You wouldn’t let them, and neither would I.”

“We need to find Julian and tell him,” I say.

Max doesn’t argue, which is a small miracle. Instead, he grabs his vest from the back of his chair and tosses it on. “Let’s go.”

THE BREAKFAST HALL IS LOUD AND CHAOTIC AS USUAL.

Everyone is crowded around the long tables, shoving food into their mouths and shouting over each other like it's some kind of contest.

Julian is easy to spot. He's sitting at the far end of the room, away from the noise, picking at a plate of scrambled eggs. His posture is hunched, his hair falling into his face as he pushes the food around with his fork.

"See?" Max says, nudging me as we weave through the tables. "He's already in a mood."

I shoot him a look that shuts him up, and we make our way over to Julian. He doesn't look up, just mumbles, "What?"

I sit down across from him, Max sliding in next to me. "We need to talk."

Julian finally glances up, his dark eyes jumping between me and Max, and sets down his fork. "What's wrong?"

"There's a family asking to adopt me."

Julian blinks, his expression blank for a moment. "What? Why you?"

I shrug, trying to mask the unease crawling under my skin. "I'm wondering that myself."

Max snorts, crossing his arms. "Well, they probably want you because you've got that whole brooding 'future serial killer' vibe—"

"Max…"

He holds his hands up in mock surrender. "I'm just saying."

"The point is, I told Calloway I'm not going anywhere unless it's with you two."

Julian lets out a humorless laugh, shaking his head. "You say that like it's up to you and they won't just do whatever they want."

"I made it clear. They're not splitting us up."

"And what did Calloway say to that?" Julian asks, his tone skeptical.

"He said he'd make the suggestion, but... you're right. It's not up to me. That's why I'm telling you now, so you're not blindsided."

Julian stares at me for a moment, then at Max, who's uncharacteristically quiet. Finally, he sighs, his shoulders sagging. "And what if they don't want us? What if they only want you?"

"They won't," I say confidently.

Julian's eyes narrow slightly, but he doesn't argue. Instead, he picks up his fork again, stabbing his eggs.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

It looks like we're studying.

In a way, we are—but not for school.

Julian is sitting cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by a fortress of books, his dark brows furrowed in concentration. Maxwell is sprawled on the bed, tossing a pencil in the air and catching it lazily, and I'm at the desk, thumbing through a worn book.

Heavy footsteps echo in the hallway, growing louder as they approach. Julian's head snaps up, his eyes darting to the door just as it swings open. We freeze.

Father Calloway steps inside, his gaze sweeping over the room. "What are you boys up to?"

"Studying," I say quickly.

Calloway's eyes narrow, lingering on the books scattered across the floor and desk. Julian subtly shifts, his hand sliding over one of the covers to obscure the title. Maxwell sits up straighter, the pencil clattering to the floor.

"Studying," Calloway repeats skeptically. He doesn't press further, though. Instead, he straightens and clasps his hands behind his back. "The family I mentioned will be arriving this afternoon to meet you."

My stomach tightens.

"They'll want to speak with each of you," Calloway continues. "I suggest you make yourselves presentable." His gaze lingers on Maxwell for a moment, who smirks in return.

“Yes, Father,” I say, cutting off whatever cheeky remark Maxwell was about to make.

Satisfied, Calloway nods and steps out of the room, closing the door behind him.

The moment his steps fade down the hall, Julian pulls the book back into view. “That was close.”

“Too close,” I say, exhaling sharply. I glance at Maxwell, who’s already reclining back on the bed like nothing happened.

“We’re fine,” Maxwell says with a grin. “He didn’t see anything.”

Ignoring him, I turn back to Julian. “What else did you find?”

His fingers skim over the page. “I found a few mentions of the Whitmores in the town history books. They were one of the founding families of Ebonridge. They’ve been here since the beginning.”

“Well, that explains why they’re loaded,” Maxwell quips.

“Keep reading,” I urge Julian.

Julian flips through the book until he stops at a faded photograph. The image shows a group of men and women in Victorian attire, standing in front of an elaborate mansion.

“Here,” Julian says, pointing. “These are the Whitmores.”

I lean over to get a better look, my eyes scanning the faces in the photograph.

“Who is he?” I ask.

Julian scans the caption beneath the photo. “Elias Addington. He was from the Addington family—one of the *other* founding families of Ebonridge.”

“None of this explains why the Whitmores suddenly want to adopt me.”

Julian closes the book, his expression thoughtful.

Maxwell claps a hand on my shoulder. “Guess you’re special, Theo.”

I shrug him off, my jaw tightening. “This isn’t funny, Max.”

“Who said I was joking? Look, whatever this is, we’ll figure it out. You’re not going through it alone.”

Julian nods in agreement.

HOURS PASS IN A HAZE OF TENSION.

A knock at my door breaks the silence. Father Gray steps in, his eyes settling on me. “Theodore, it’s time.”

As I follow him down the hall, my heartbeat quickens with every step. When we pass the library doors, I catch a glimpse of the other boys milling about, laughing and shoving at each other like it’s just another day. But for me, nothing feels the same.

When we reach Father Calloway’s office, the door opens, and Julian steps out, his dark eyes blazing with anger.

Our gazes lock, and I almost ask him what happened, but he brushes past me without a word.

As soon as I step inside, the atmosphere shifts.

Father Calloway stands behind his desk, a polite but strained smile on his face. Sitting in the chairs opposite him are a man and a woman who look like they’ve stepped out of a painting.

The man exudes authority. His salt and pepper hair is slicked back, and his tailored suit fits like it was made for him.

The woman beside him is just as striking. Her blonde hair is pinned back in a way that’s both elegant and severe, and her deep burgundy dress looks expensive enough to feed every boy in this orphanage for a year. She assesses me in a way that makes my skin crawl.

“Theodore, this is Mr. Lionel Whitmore and his wife, Margaret.”

I straighten my shoulders, refusing to let them see any nerves.

Lionel stands, extending his hand. His grip is firm, his eyes boring into mine.

Margaret stays seated, offering a thin smile. “We’ve heard a lot about you, Theodore.”

I glance at Father Calloway, whose expression gives nothing away. “Good things, I hope.”

Lionel smiles. “Very good things. You’ve made quite an impression here.”

I don’t know how to reply, so I nod, keeping my face neutral.

“Please, sit,” Margaret says, gesturing to the chair across from her.

I do as she says, every muscle in my body coiled tight.

Father Calloway clears his throat, drawing my attention. “The Whitmores are interested in adopting you, Theodore.”

Lionel speaks up. “We believe you have great potential. We’d like to offer you an opportunity to become part of our family.”

I should be grateful, excited, relieved, but all I feel is *suspicion*.

"Why me?" My voice is sharper than I intended.

Margaret tilts her head, her smile still perfectly in place. "Because you're special."

The answer feels rehearsed. My hands grip the arms of the chair, my knuckles turning white.

Lionel leans forward. "This isn't just a chance to leave this place, Theodore. It's a chance to be part of something greater."

Something greater.

Father Calloway shifts uncomfortably behind his desk, and I catch the unease in his eyes.

"I'm not leaving without Julian and Maxwell."

The room goes quiet for a beat. Lionel leans back in his chair, regarding me with a calculated expression.

"Ah, yes. Julian is the quiet one. Reserved, isn't he?"

"He is, but he's family to me, and so is Maxwell. If I'm going anywhere, they're coming with me."

Lionel hums, his lips curling into what I think is supposed to be a smile. "Julian might be quiet, but it's not a bad thing. A boy like that could fit into the family well."

I glance at Father Calloway, who remains silent. My gaze shifts back to Lionel. "What about Maxwell?"

Lionel meets my eyes. "If that's what you want, we won't separate you," he says simply, as if the decision is as easy as picking a tie to wear.

Relief sparks in my chest, but it's quickly snuffed out by my skepticism. I don't trust them, but if this is what it takes to make sure we stick together, so be it.

I cross my arms, letting out a sharp breath. "I guess I don't really have a say if this is what you've decided."

Father Calloway gives me a solemn nod, his hands clasped tightly in front of him, as if in prayer. "Theodore, this is a chance for you and the others to have a new life, one with opportunities."

I'm not sure if I believe that, but I bite back the sarcastic comment on the tip of my tongue.

"Great," Lionel says, standing and smoothing down his suit jacket. His smile is a little too wide. "We'll be back for the boys next week."

I watch as he shakes Father Calloway's hand then turns to leave the office, Margaret following close behind. Just before they step out, Lionel glances back at me. "Take care, Theodore."

THE MANSION IS LIKE SOMETHING OUT OF A DREAM—OR A NIGHTMARE.

I can't believe the sheer size of the place.

It towers above us, and everything about it feels imposing, as if the very walls whisper secrets we weren't meant to hear.

I'm taking in the grandeur of it all—the heavy iron gates swinging open, the circular driveway, the carved statues staring down at us—when Julian's hand shoots out, gripping my wrist so tight, I almost yank away.

"Theo," he murmurs.

I turn to him. "What?"

His gaze locks on the house, his pupils blown wide. "We've seen this before."

I frown. "What are you talking about?"

Julian swallows, glancing over his shoulder, as if checking to make sure no one is listening. "The book," he says. "The one from the library. The Lost Histories of Vanguard."

The name alone makes my stomach tighten. It's one of the only books in the orphanage worth reading, filled with old accounts of the town's founding families, stories of power, bloodlines, and the legacy of the elite. And among the brittle pages, there was a photograph…

I turn back to the mansion, eyes scanning the arched windows, the ivy creeping up the stone, the sprawling balconies. A chill settles in my bones.

"Shit," I mutter under my breath. "You're right."

Julian's grip on my wrist tightens before he finally lets go. "This mansion isn't just some founding family's heirloom," he whispers. "It's *their* house."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

I walk down the corridor, my steps nearly silent against the polished floor.

A lot has changed since we arrived at the Whitmore estate. Months have passed, and the shock of our new life has dulled. Maxwell, Julian, and I aren't just boys who were adopted into wealth. We are Whitmores now. Brothers.

I stop in front of Maxwell's room and rap my knuckles against the wood.

"Maxwell," I call. "Open up."

I knock again, harder this time. "Maxwell."

Silence.

Then, I hear shuffling and the creak of the mattress.

What is he up to?

I narrow my eyes, already suspicious, and reach for the door, twisting the handle and stepping inside.

What I see stops me in my tracks.

Julian is sprawled out on Maxwell's bed, half-buried under the blankets, completely unbothered. What really catches my attention is the massive lump under the covers beside him. Before I can even open my mouth, Maxwell's head suddenly pops out from beneath the sheets, his tousled black hair a mess, a wicked grin stretched across his face in a way that tells me I've walked in on something I shouldn't have.

"Hey, brother," Maxwell snickers.

I blink.

Julian lets out a breath and shoves Maxwell's head away with one hand, muttering, "Idioto."

I stare at them, my lips parting. "What the actual fuck do you two do when I'm not around?" My voice rises a little, my fingers pressing into the doorframe. "Why am I *always* catching you in these *compromised* positions?"

Maxwell bursts out laughing and kicks the blanket off, revealing himself in nothing but a pair of briefs, his lean form on full display.

Jesus fucking Christ.

The outline of his hard-on is still visible, straining against the fabric.

I immediately scowl, but my traitorous eyes dart down for half a second before I snap my gaze back up. Maxwell notices.

The bastard grins wider.

I immediately avert my gaze, running a hand down my face. "For fuck's sake, Maxwell."

Instead of showing an ounce of shame, he jumps off the bed, standing tall.

"Well, *Theodore*," he drawls, stepping forward. "It looks like you'd also love to join in on the fun, wouldn't you?"

He stretches his arms over his head; then, as if to really sell it, he does a few slow lunges.

I shake my head. *How did I get stuck with this guy?*

Julian scoffs. Then, without even looking, he grabs a pillow and hurls it at Maxwell's head.

It smacks him right in the face, and Maxwell stumbles back, rubbing his forehead.

"One day, I'm putting a lock on my memories of walking in on you assholes."

Maxwell smirks. "One day, you're gonna walk in and *not* want to leave."

I scowl. "Fuck off."

Despite my words and the ridiculousness of catching them like this *again*, I'm not mad.

I should be jealous of their bond, the way they always seem to gravitate toward each other, no matter where we are. They communicate without words, some silent understanding that's just *theirs*. But I'm not.

Julian and Maxwell need each other in ways I don't fully understand, and I'd never come between them.

Unless, of course, it was to maybe… watch.

The thought slides into my mind unbidden, tempting.

My dick twitches in my slacks.

I inhale sharply. *Not now, Theo.*

I straighten and roll my shoulders back, forcing the fantasy away. Clearing my throat, I say, "I need you to follow me."

Maxwell raises a brow, still smirking. "No, thanks."

I give him a flat look.

Julian sighs from the bed. "Where?"

"The library." I turn to the door, not waiting to see if they'll follow. I know they will. "I have something to show you."

Behind me, I hear the rustle of blankets and the creak of the bed as Julian rises.

"Now you've got me curious, brother," Maxwell hums.

When we step into the massive library, I lead them to the long oak desk near the center of the room, where an assortment of books is stacked haphazardly. Some of them are from St. Dismas—the ones we managed to sneak out before we were pulled from the orphanage—but most are from here.

I've spent the last couple of months scouring these shelves, looking for answers. There are entire volumes dedicated to the Whitmores, to Vanguard—which, from what I've pieced together, is some kind of exclusive club, a *society*.

I lower myself into the leather chair behind the desk, running my fingers along the polished surface. Julian stands rigid, scanning the books piled high in front of us but keeping his hands to himself. Maxwell, as expected, has no such reservations. He picks up one of the tomes, flipping through its brittle pages, whistling low under his breath.

"This place is a fucking goldmine," he mutters.

"You've been digging through all this for weeks now. Did you finally find something?" Julian asks.

My fingers graze the spine of a nearby book as I speak.

"This territory has ties to something old and dark. There was a cult that used to perform sacrificial rituals on women. They would take them from the villages, slit their throats, and collect their blood. They drank it, fed on

it.” I lean forward, lowering my voice. “It was said that the blood of these randomly chosen women would bless the men, give them power.”

Maxwell exhales. “Holy shit. You found all this in these books?”

I nod. “Yes, and through articles.”

Their attention sharpens.

I glance toward the far shelves. “I was searching through the tomes, looking for more connections, and I pulled a book from the shelf, only for it to *move*. Behind it was a secret door and a passage leading into a hidden hallway.”

Maxwell’s brows lift in intrigue and Julian’s eyes widen.

I rise from my chair. “You need to see this for yourselves.”

I pull the lever, feeling it shift against my hand as the hidden opening reveals itself. The air in the secret passageway is thick and musty.

I pull a heavy box from one of the shelves. Dust stirs in the air as I lift the lid, revealing a collection of yellowed newspaper articles from The Black Quill stacked neatly inside.

Maxwell and Julian move in closer, eyes narrowed in confusion as I flip open the top layer.

Missing Woman Found Dead, *Investigation into Disappearance Stalled*, *Families Beg Authorities for Help*.

I keep pulling articles, one after another, and they all seem to blur together with the same tragic stories: missing women and families screaming for help.

Maxwell’s hand hovers over the papers as he reads. “This is insane,” he whispers, flipping through them faster.

I don’t respond, my own mind racing as I move to the next box, smaller than the first, and set it down in front of them. The articles inside are more recent. I take one out, showing it to the guys.

Fatal Car Accident Claims Lives of Young Couple and Infant Son.

Celeste and Joseph Addington, along with their infant son, Andrew, were killed in a tragic car accident on the evening of July 16, 1991.

I look at Maxwell and Julian. Their eyes flick to each other, then back to me.

“Do you think they could be your parents?” Maxwell asks.

My eyes lock on the headline.

I’ve never known much about where I came from, but the timeline lines up far too neatly to ignore.

Could I be related to the Addingtons?

I swallow, my throat dry. “Maybe.”

From my findings, the Addingtons were longtime allies of the Whitmores. They settled here together, building their legacies on this very land. *They* were the ones who called this place Ebonridge.

I look at the photo that accompanies the article. It’s faded, so the faces aren’t clear.

Maxwell and Julian exchange uneasy glances, their brows furrowing as they take in everything. But then Julian speaks up, confused. “Wait a minute. This doesn’t add up. If the infant was dead, how the hell are you alive?”

It’s a good question.

“As per the article, it says an infant’s body was never recovered from the debris after the accident. They assumed the baby was dead because of it. They claimed it was burnt to ashes by the fire from the crash.”

I can feel the blood rushing in my ears as the implications start to hit me. If that was really me, and I wasn’t in the car, then where the hell was I? And why would they cover up my survival?

“So, what happened to you? If they didn’t find your body, then who took you?” Julian questions.

There are too many questions, too many answers I don’t have yet. But one thing’s for sure: this wasn’t just some freak accident.

A sudden noise sounds from the corridor. My heart skips in my chest, and all the breath I was holding rushes out in a sharp exhale.

Maxwell’s eyes grow wide. “Shit. Someone’s coming.”

We all scramble. I shove the box back onto the shelf, my hands shaking as I try to make it look like we were never here. Julian’s already grabbing the papers, stuffing them into the box as quickly as he can. We have to get everything back where it was before whoever comes.

I glance toward the doorway, my mind racing. We were supposed to be home alone today.

Maxwell glances nervously at the entrance, then back at the shelves. “Hurry. We need to get out of here before—”

The sound grows louder—footsteps and then a voice. I can’t make out the words, but it’s close.

“Shit,” I mutter under my breath. “We can’t get caught.”

Julian slams the last of the papers into the box and quickly closes the lid, his fingers flying as he pushes the box back into its hiding place.

Maxwell's already moving toward the door, ready to bolt if we need to. "We slip out, act normal."

I nod.

Without saying a word, we all move as one, darting back toward the secret passageway. The door slides shut behind us.

Maxwell and Julian move quickly, each finding a corner of the library. Julian settles on one of the couches by the fireplace, grabbing a random book off the coffee table and flipping it open like he has been reading it all along. Maxwell follows suit, taking a seat on the other chair, pretending to read as well.

I take a seat at the desk, pulling a book from the shelf nearby and setting it in front of me. I can't focus on the words, but I don't dare let my eyes wander. We have to look normal—like we've been here the whole time.

The door creaks open, and Lionel steps into the room, his looming presence immediately filling the space. His eyes scan the library, settling on us with a knowing gaze. I force myself to keep my posture relaxed, like I'm just another kid lost in a book. But inside, my heart is racing.

"Well, it's good to see you boys making use of the library. I trust you're keeping busy?" Lionel remarks.

He stands there for a moment, waiting for a response. His eyes linger a little too long on me, and I feel a chill run down my spine.

Maxwell clears his throat and looks up from his book. "Yeah, just looking for something interesting."

Julian nods, playing along. "Trying to catch up on some studying."

Lionel hums, still watching us with that unsettling look. "I trust you're avoiding trouble."

I can't shake the feeling he's onto us.

"We're good," I say casually.

Lionel watches for a beat longer before he nods, as if satisfied with our answers. "Very well. Let me know if you need anything. I'll be in my office."

He turns and walks out of the room, the door clicking shut behind him.

The tension in the air finally breaks, but we all stay still. We wait until we're sure he's gone, and then we let out a collective breath.

I stand up, pacing as I speak in a low voice. “This is bigger than I thought. The Addingtons, the crash. It all ties together. There has to be more to it.”

Maxwell sets the book down, finally giving me his full attention. “Yeah, but there’s something about all this that doesn’t sit right with me. They buried the truth for a reason, Theo. We need to be careful.”

Julian glances at him, then back to me. “Right, but what do we do next? We can’t just keep digging without a plan.”

“You’re right. We need to approach this smartly, but we can’t just walk away from what we found, not after seeing all those articles. I don’t care how deep I have to dig. I need to find the truth, and I’m not going to stop until I do.”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

ISABEL

OceanofPDF.com

Present

The room they've put me in is big, almost luxurious, with high ceilings and polished hardwood floors that gleam in the sunlight streaming through the oversized windows. The bed is enormous, with soft, fluffy pillows and a comforter that's way too warm for how cold I feel inside. There's even a sitting area in the corner, complete with an armchair and a small bookshelf stocked with novels I might've enjoyed under different circumstances.

But none of that matters. I can't be thankful for any of it.

They kidnapped me, for God's sake.

No amount of comfort or niceties can erase that fact. The sheer audacity of it makes my blood boil. They took me from my life, my freedom, and now they think they can pacify me with a pretty room and a soft mattress.

I get up from the bed and pace to the window, wrapping my arms around myself. The view outside is stunning—rolling green hills, dense trees stretching toward the horizon, and a winding path that disappears into the woods. It's the kind of place people would pay to vacation at, a place meant to feel like peace.

I feel anything but peaceful.

Pressing my palm against the cold glass, I stare out at the picturesque scenery. It feels like a cruel joke. All this beauty, all this *freedom*, just outside the walls of this house, and I can't touch any of it.

My fingers curl into a fist against the window, and I close my eyes, forcing myself to breathe. Losing my temper won't help me. It won't get me out of here.

There's another reason for my stomach twisting. They're trying to keep me comfortable for a reason. And I know what it is now. They want me to work for them, become their mouthpiece, tear down their father's legacy in The Black Quill and expose him for the monster he was.

I agreed.

Not because I wanted to, but because I didn't have a choice.

I turn away from the window, scanning the room. The ornate furniture, the soft rug beneath my bare feet, the books—it's all an illusion.

It's almost laughable. Just days ago, I was in the basement, pacing in circles like a caged animal. I had refused to eat, drink, or give them the

satisfaction of thinking I'd accept their care. When Julian brought me food, I threw the plate at him.

He didn't even flinch. He just looked at me with those dark, unreadable eyes before dragging my flailing body to the basement.

I regretted it the second the door locked behind him.

The hours dragged on. The longer I sat there, the more the silence crept in.

Were they going to leave me there?

Would I rot in that cold space, nothing more than a stubborn fool who refused to play by their rules?

Fear warred with fury.

I hated them.

I hated that they held my fate in their hands. No matter how much I wanted to fight, I couldn't control what happened next.

And then, Theodore came. He made me kneel, put his hands on me, slapped me until my skin burned.

I should have despised it. Screamed, clawed at him, done *something*. But I didn't.

Part of me—some twisted, shameful part of me—*liked it.*

Heat rushes to my face, and I shake my head, as if it will drive the thoughts away. No. I won't let him get into my head. He won't manipulate me like that.

I might have agreed to help them, but I am *not* theirs.

They can dress me in silk, give me a warm bed, but it doesn't change the truth.

I am still their prisoner.

It's hard to tell how long I've been here. Days? A week? My sense of time feels warped, stretched thin like the nerves in my body.

Days before getting locked in the basement, I overheard them talking just outside my door. They thought I was asleep, but I've learned to stay quiet.

"She burned it to the ground," one of them said. I think it was Maxwell; his voice held an edge of amusement that felt out of place. "The old mansion, gone. Poof."

I had frowned in the dark, straining to catch more. *Who* had burned it? They'd moved on to other plans, something about shifting power, but I couldn't focus on their words after that.

My mind kept circling back to that one sentence. *She burned it to the ground.*

At the time, I didn't know who they meant. But when Theodore told me Valeria and Camila were responsible for Lionel's death, it all made sense.

Of course, it was her.

A smile tugs at my lips. That fire has Valeria's fingerprints all over it. She has always been reckless, willing to do whatever it takes to strike back against people like *them*.

I wish I could have seen the old, oppressive mansion collapsing in on itself, reduced to nothing but ash and rubble.

I sit back down on the edge of the bed, bouncing my knee as my thoughts race.

My smile fades almost as quickly as it appeared. I miss her.

Valeria, where are you?

I know she's still out there, looking for me. She has to be.

A sound outside my room pulls me out of my thoughts. One of them is coming.

I scramble back on the bed, pressing myself against the frame as the knob turns.

I don't know which brother it will be this time, but it doesn't matter.

The door creaks open, and I whip my head toward it. Julian strides in and tosses a towel at me. It lands in a heap on the bed as he chucks a small bag. It bounces once before coming to a rest next to my leg.

I stare at it, then up at him, narrowing my eyes. "What's this?"

He crosses his arms, his face giving nothing away. "I thought you'd want a shower."

I snort, shaking my head. "No, I mean, what's *in* the bag?"

His jaw tenses slightly, but he doesn't answer right away. Curious, I reach for it. Inside, I find an assortment of—oh.

Oh.

My face heats up immediately as I pull out a box of tampons and a pack of pads, followed by a little bottle of painkillers and a heating pad.

I look up at him, deadpan. "Seriously?"

He shifts awkwardly, his usual unflappable demeanor cracking just a little. "You've been here for a month," he mutters, scratching the back of his neck. "I figured you'd need some of that stuff soon."

I blink at him, trying to process what's happening. Out of all the things I expected, this wasn't one of them. For a moment, I'm caught between wanting to laugh and wanting to tell him to fuck off. It's oddly thoughtful, but also so unbelievably awkward. I don't know how to respond.

Julian avoids my gaze, his hands stuffed into his pockets, as if he's already regretting the gesture. There's something endearing about how uncomfortable he looks, but I squash the thought before it takes root. I don't want to give him the satisfaction of thinking he did something sweet, even if—well, maybe he has.

Out of all the brothers, Julian seems to be the one who's the most… human. The most caring, even. But somehow, he also gets the worst of my attitude. Probably because he's always the one hovering and checking on me like I'm some fragile thing about to break.

My fingers tighten around the bag as a realization hits me like a freight train. I've been here for a month.

A month.

Thirty days of being trapped in this gilded cage, at the mercy of these men and their cryptic motives.

My chest tightens, and I try to push the rising panic down, but it's no use. My breathing quickens, and my hands shake as I clutch the bag.

Julian's gaze sharpens. "What's wrong?"

"Get out!" I snap.

He doesn't move. Instead, he tilts his head slightly, studying me like I'm some kind of puzzle he's trying to solve. "Relax, corazón," he says softly.

The words disarm me for a moment, but I shake it off. I don't want his concern, his softness, or his awkward attempts at kindness.

"Just go," I seethe, not meeting his eyes.

Julian lingers for a moment, his lips pressing into a thin line. Then, he turns and leaves, closing the door quietly behind him.

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, I'M FRESHLY SHOWERED, MY SKIN STILL WARM from the hot water.

Hunger gnaws at my stomach, refusing to be ignored any longer. I hate that my body betrays me like this, that it needs anything from them. I don't

want to be caught eating after I've stubbornly declined almost every meal they've offered.

But I can't sleep like this. My stomach growls again, the sound loud, and I give in. Quietly, like a mouse, I decide to sneak down to the kitchen to find something to eat.

Obviously, I've been eating when my body demands it—no one can live on pride alone—but I've been careful not to let them see.

Barefoot, I tiptoe down the stairs. The house is eerily silent, and I cling to the hope that none of the brothers are lurking around. The last thing I want is for one of them to catch me scavenging for food.

I glance toward the front door as I pass, my eyes automatically drifting to the lock. Still bolted. The windows I'd tried to pry open my first few days here remain firmly shut; their latches stubbornly unyielding.

It was naïve of me to think they'd just leave the house unsecured. These men might be a lot of things, but stupid isn't one of them.

The kitchen is dark when I step inside. My bare feet make no sound as I move toward the fridge.

I hesitate, glancing over my shoulder.

The fridge hums as I pull the doors open. I scan the shelves quickly, my eyes landing on a leftover container of pasta. I grab it, along with a fork from a drawer nearby.

I don't bother heating it up. Instead, I slide down to the cold tile floor, my back against the cabinets as I dig in. The first bite is heaven, and I have to stop myself from moaning. I eat quickly, shoveling the food into my mouth like someone might snatch it away at any second.

Halfway through, I pause, fork hovering over the container. My eyes dart to the shadows at the edge of the room, paranoia prickling at my skin.

I finish the meal in record time, barely savoring the last few bites as I scrape the container clean.

Quickly, I get to my feet, rinsing off the fork and container in the sink. I'm careful to dry them and place them back exactly where they belong. If I'm lucky, they won't even notice.

I turn to leave, feeling accomplished in my stealth, when a voice cuts through the darkness.

"I know you're there."

I scream, my heart leaping into my throat as I stumble back, nearly knocking into the counter. My eyes dart to the living room, where the voice

came from.

Squinting, I spot Julian in the far corner of the room, lounging in a chair under a lamp, his head bent over something in his lap. A pencil is in his hand, moving lightly against the page of what looks like a sketchpad. He doesn't even glance up, like startling me out of my skin wasn't worth the effort of lifting his head.

"Are you trying to give me a fucking heart attack?" I snap, pressing a hand to my chest, still catching my breath.

"You're the one sneaking around in the dark, mama," he replies, unbothered. "I'm just sitting here."

I glare at him, though I know he probably can't see it. "Why didn't you say anything when you saw me?"

He shrugs, finally glancing up. "Didn't want to interrupt your meal. I figured you'd scream at me or something." He smirks faintly, and my cheeks burn.

"Well, congratulations, because I screamed anyway."

Julian chuckles, looking back down at his sketchpad.

I shift awkwardly, unsure what to do. "How long have you been sitting there?"

He doesn't look up. "Long enough. I know you've been coming down here every night. You're not exactly quiet."

My stomach drops. Embarrassment floods my body, hotter than the steam from my shower earlier. "You've been watching me?"

"What do you think?" he says, his pencil scratching lightly against the paper.

Ah, yes. I'm their prisoner.

"Relax. I'm not gonna tell anyone."

"Good," I mutter, shifting uncomfortably. "Because there's nothing to tell."

Julian doesn't respond immediately. He just keeps sketching, focusing on the page. I take a step toward the doorway, ready to retreat to my room, when his voice stops me again.

"You don't have to sneak around, you know," he says without looking up. "No one's going to stop you from eating."

The statement catches me off guard, twisting something in my gut like a splinter lodged too deep to pull out. I don't know what to do with it.

However, instead of heading back upstairs, I find myself lingering at the edge of the living room. My feet seem to move on their own, carrying me closer to the soft glow of the lamp where Julian sits. I berate myself for doing it, but I do it anyway.

Carefully, I step around the coffee table and lower myself onto the couch, leaving a decent space between us. Julian doesn't acknowledge my presence as his pencil continues its soft scratching on the page.

"What are you doing?" I ask before I can stop myself.

"Drawing."

I roll my eyes at his clipped answer. "Drawing what?"

At this, he pauses. His pencil stills, resting lightly against the paper as he exhales. Slowly, he lifts his head, and his gaze meets mine.

He turns the sketchbook toward me.

My breath catches in my throat.

It's me.

My own face stares back at me, rendered in graphite with stunning detail. The sharpness of my eyes, the curve of my lips, the soft fall of my hair—it's all there, perfectly captured.

The expression on my face in the portrait is... vulnerable.

It's as if Julian somehow sketched the parts of me I try so hard to hide—the fear, the anger, the loneliness—and laid them bare on the page.

My fingers hover over the sketch, not quite touching it. "You drew me?"

Julian shrugs, setting the sketchpad on his lap. "Yeah."

"But... why?"

He shrugs again, like it's not a big deal. "I don't know. It's just a hobby." He leans back in the chair. "And I've been seeing a lot of you lately, so…"

I don't know what to say. I can't stop staring at the portrait. How did he manage to make it look so alive? So... me?

"Can I keep it?" I blurt out before I can second-guess myself.

"Yeah, whatever."

I carefully tear my eyes away from the sketch to look at him. "When did you start drawing?"

"When I was a kid," he says simply, picking up his pencil and tapping it lightly against the arm of the chair. "More after my mom died."

My chest tightens at the bluntness of his words. "What about your dad?"

"Never had one."

“You’re an orphan,” I murmur, the realization dawning on me.

Julian doesn’t react at first. He just keeps tapping the pencil against the chair, his gaze fixed on some invisible point on the floor.

Finally, he nods. “Yeah.” No elaboration, no details.

I feel a pang of guilt for how I’ve treated him since I’ve been here. Not that being kidnapped warrants politeness, but... still. Out of all the brothers, Julian has been the kindest to me, the least threatening. And now, seeing this other side of him—the quiet artist, the boy who grew up without parents—it catches me off guard.

“I didn’t know,” I say softly, unsure why I feel the need to say it at all.

He looks up at me. “Why would you?”

I don’t have an answer to that.

I glance down at the sketch again, my fingers brushing the edge of the page. The detail in it, the care... It’s like he sees more of me than I want anyone to see.

“You’re really good at this.”

Julian grunts, like he’s not used to compliments. “It’s just something I do to pass the time.”

My gaze drops to the tattoos lining his forearms, intricate designs that curl over his knuckles and peek out from under his sleeves. There’s a fresh one, still covered in a thin layer of clear wrap, inked into the skin near his wrist—a small, detailed moth with its wings spread wide, perched just above a burning matchstick. I tilt my head, curiosity getting the better of me.

“What does it mean?” I ask.

He glances down at it. “Being drawn to something you know will destroy you, but going to it anyway.”

The words hit harder than I expect, sinking under my skin like the ink on his.

I know he’s talking about more than the tattoo. And worse—I know exactly what he means.

“Did you draw it?”

“Yeah.” A pause. “I inked it myself.”

My brows lift. “You *tattooed* yourself?” I’m equal parts impressed and horrified.

The corner of his mouth twitches. “Sometimes, you’ve got to take things into your own hands.”

“I can’t tell if that’s impressive or insane,” I mutter, shaking my head.

He laughs, and it’s entirely unexpected. It catches me off guard, wrapping around me in a way I don’t like. The sound is so foreign coming from him, and it tugs at something in my chest, something I don’t want to acknowledge.

I *shouldn’t* be warming up to him. I *shouldn’t* care about the way his voice dips when he speaks or how the warmth in his eyes lights up like a flame that could just as easily burn me.

My head feels crowded with too many thoughts, most of them centering around this strange, quiet man in front of me.

“You should sleep,” Julian says abruptly, breaking the moment. “It’s late.”

“Yeah. Thanks... for this.” I hold up the sketch, offering him a small smile.

He nods, already turning his attention back to the blank page in his sketchbook.

As I walk back to my room, I clutch the portrait to my chest, my thoughts a tangled mess.

For the first time, I wonder if there’s more to Julian than I thought.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

ISABEL

I’m small again.

The room is dark, the shadows on the walls stretching long and thin like claws. My breathing is shallow, like my lungs can’t take in enough air.

I don’t know what I was dreaming about, but it doesn’t matter. I’m awake now, and I’m scared.

Tears sting my eyes, but I don’t dare make a sound.

“Isa?”

The voice is soft and warm, like the sun breaking through a storm.

I turn my head and see Valeria sitting on the edge of my bed. Her blonde hair falls over her shoulders. She looks older than I am, but not by much. Still, there’s something about her that feels safe.

“I’m here.” She reaches out and brushes the damp strands from my forehead. “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

I can’t find the words to respond, so I just nod, biting my lip to keep from crying.

She slips under the blanket beside me and pulls me into her arms. “Shh,” she whispers, rocking me gently. “You’re not alone. I’m here.”

I WAKE UP WITH A START. MY BODY FEELS HEAVY, SLUGGISH, AND FOR A moment, I can’t tell where I am.

Then, I feel a hand smoothing over my hair, a low, soothing voice murmuring words I can’t quite make out.

“Shh... it’s okay. You’re okay.”

The words cut through the fog of sleep, and I freeze, panic flaring in my chest.

I force my eyes open, blinking against the faint light in the room. It takes a moment for my vision to clear, but when it does, I see Maxwell.

He’s sitting on the edge of the bed, his arms wrapped around me, holding me close.

I pull back slightly, startled but no longer scared. There’s something about the way he looks at me that feels... safe.

“What—” My voice comes out hoarse. “What are you doing?”

He doesn’t let go, his hands still resting lightly on my shoulders. “You were having a nightmare,” he says simply. “Thrashing around, mumbling. Thought I’d wake you before you hurt yourself.”

I blink at him, my mind still trying to catch up. I was dreaming? The memory of Valeria’s voice lingers in my mind like a phantom.

“I... I didn’t mean to—”

“You don’t have to explain.”

For a moment, we just sit there in silence. His presence is grounding, and I hate how much I don’t want him to let go.

Eventually, I find my voice again. “How did you even—”

“Door wasn’t locked,” he interrupts with a small smile. “Heard you from down the hall.”

I narrow my eyes at him, finally finding a shred of annoyance to cling to.

He smirks, the softness in his expression fading back into his usual cocky demeanor. “What can I say? I’m a light sleeper.”

I roll my eyes and push his hands away, sitting up straighter. “Well, I’m fine now. You can go.”

He doesn’t move, his gaze searching mine like he’s trying to see past my words. Then, he nods, standing up and stretching lazily.

“Sweet dreams, Starling,” he says with a wink before heading for the door.

I glare at his back, but the warmth in my chest doesn’t quite match the irritation in my expression.

As the door clicks shut behind him, I lay back down, staring at the ceiling. The memory of Valeria’s voice still echoes in my mind, but now, it’s joined by Max’s.

You’re not alone. I’m here.
I hate the way it makes me feel.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

I press the cool glass of scotch to my lips and take a slow sip. Sleep has become a distant memory. Ever since I inherited Vanguard and stepped into the role of patriarch, my nights have been consumed by the mountain of tasks that come with running this empire.

But that isn't enough. It's my family's burden, a legacy built on blood and secrets, and no matter how much control I think I have, it will never fully belong to me. That's why I made my own move with Iron Veil Distillery, a brand that will be synonymous with power and refinement. It will be my own empire, separate from Vanguard.

Maxwell has Madhouse, Julian has the archives. Iron Veil is mine.

I swirl the amber liquid in my glass, thinking of everything that has gone into this deal. It started as an indulgence, a way to take my love for scotch and turn it into something tangible. Now, it has evolved into something much bigger, a necessary balance to everything else.

The phone buzzes on my desk, Nathan's name flashing across the screen.

Nathan has been with me for years, one of my most trusted employees at the cyber security firm. He's sharp, methodical, the kind of man who never leaves loose ends. When I started working on the Iron Veil deal, it felt right to have him oversee the logistics.

I already know what he's going to say.

I set the glass down and answer, my voice steady. "Tell me."

"It's done."

I exhale slowly, satisfaction settling deep in my chest. “Good. I want everything prepped for the announcement.”

Nathan hesitates for half a second. “And how are you planning on handling that?”

A slow smirk tugs at my lips. “I already have someone in mind.”

The deal is sealed. The distillery is mine. Now, it’s time for Isabel to prove herself useful.

A knock pulls me from my thoughts, and I know it’s Julian before I even look up.

“I have to go,” I tell Nathan, setting the phone aside as the door creaks open.

Julian steps in, a stack of papers and a thick leather-bound book tucked under his arm.

“Got something for you,” he starts, shuffling through the documents. “First off, you were right about the connection between Vanguard and the town. It goes back way further than we thought.”

“Go on,” I prod, leaning forward. My heart is already picking up its pace.

Vanguard is more than just a private club. It’s the beating heart of the Whitmore legacy, and every file in my father’s old office seems to reveal another layer of secrets, alliances, and betrayals. Julian has been helping me piece it all together. He has a knack for uncovering things no one else can, thanks to the years he spent practically living in libraries. After we found those history books back at St. Dismas many years ago, Julian became obsessed with the history of Ebonridge, especially the Whitmore family’s role in it. Now, as the town’s archivist, he has access to resources I can only dream of.

He picks up the leather-bound book, flipping it open to a page in the middle. “This is where it gets... strange.” He runs a finger over the inked text, the writing old but still legible. “There’s mention of something called The Keepers of the Bloodline, a group that was active in the late 1800s. Thing is, it doesn’t read like they were some rogue faction or underground cult. It’s like they were deeply tied to the town itself, almost as if they were using the town as their cover.”

He flips another page, showing me an old, faded map of the town, a circle drawn around a piece of land that looks eerily familiar. I lean in, squinting, the outline of the property almost burned into my memory.

“Is that our estate?”

“Yeah, right at the heart of everything. It has always been tied to the family’s influence in the town, but I don’t think anyone realized just how deep those roots go.”

My mind races, trying to make sense of what this all means.

“Are you saying this is where it all started?” I ask. “This is where the cult operated?”

Julian nods slowly, his gaze fixed on the map, as if he can still see the ghosts of the past lingering there. “It’s where they centered their activities, or at least where they conducted their meetings.”

“Considering the Whitmore history, it wouldn’t be surprising,” I mutter.

“The records talk about the sacrifices...”

My mind flashes to *Latibulum Noctis* and the rituals that follow.

“You’re saying the games are tied to this cult?”

“Exactly. The games were a modern iteration of something much older. The way the participants were chosen, and the structure of the sacrifices all mirror the rituals of the Keepers. Lionel and his predecessors didn’t come up with this out of thin air. They were continuing a tradition, repurposing it to fit their time.”

I grit my teeth, anger bubbling under the surface. The deeper I dig, the more I realize just how complicated the history of the Whitmores really is.

“So, everything we were forced to endure wasn’t just about the family’s legacy. It was about keeping the cult’s influence alive.”

I glance at the stack of documents on my desk, old deeds and records, all stamped with the ouroboros and key. It’s clear now that Vanguard isn’t just a playground for the wealthy; it’s a hub for something far bigger.

“That’s what I’m starting to believe,” Julian agrees. “There’s too much history here that lines up. I don’t think this is a coincidence.”

He sets the book down, pulling out a stack of yellowing newspaper clippings. I scan the faded headlines. *“Mysterious Disappearances Spark Outrage,” “Town on Edge as Women Vanish Without a Trace,”* and *“The Dark Secrets of Ebonridge: A Cult’s Reign of Terror?”*

They remind me of the articles we found in the estate’s library when we were younger.

Julian taps a few of the pages with his finger. “This is where shit gets interesting. There are first-hand accounts from when the cult’s activities were exposed. It all started when people in the town began noticing more

and more women were going missing. At first, there were just rumors, but then... bodies started piling up."

Julian looks up at me, his face grim. "The articles don't go into detail, but it was clear something was happening. As the disappearances increased, so did whispers of a group operating in the shadows. Eventually, someone got a hold of information that led to the cult's exposure. The town rioted. They burned their homes, destroyed anything they could find. But it's like they erased the whole thing from history after that, like they wanted to forget what happened."

The room feels colder now. "But you think they never really went away."

Julian nods. "I'm not sure who's still involved, but I can't shake the feeling that the cult is still operating under our noses. It might not be as obvious as it was back then, but I'm convinced they never truly disbanded."

A muscle in my jaw tics as I consider his words. I can't ignore the sinking feeling the council knows more than they've let on. If the cult still exists in some form, if their influence still lingers in Ebonridge, it's impossible that the council—the very people who pride themselves on controlling every facet of this town—would be unaware.

Suddenly, the sound of the front door slamming echoes through the house, followed by heavy, uneven footsteps. Moments later, Maxwell strides into the study, looking disheveled.

"Well, what did I miss?" he asks, running a hand through his messy hair.

Julian shoots him a look. "You just got back from Madhouse, didn't you?"

Maxwell smirks, shrugging. "Guilty."

Julian sighs but doesn't bother with a lecture. "We were just going over a few things I found in Lionel's files and the archives."

"Oh, fantastic," Maxwell says, rolling his eyes as he flops into the nearest chair. He waves a hand in an exaggeratedly aristocratic fashion, like some bored noble entertaining a court jester. "More family secrets to ruin my day. Go on, then."

Julian fills him in. Maxwell listens, his expression shifting from mild amusement to something more serious as the pieces start to fall into place.

"Huh," he finally says, leaning back in his chair. "So, the games weren't just Lionel being his usual sadistic self. I can't say I'm surprised, but

damn.” He pauses before he adds with a dry chuckle, “At least now, we have a valid excuse for how screwed up we are.”

Julian shakes his head, muttering something about how Maxwell never takes anything seriously. Then, he says, “I’ll keep digging,” before standing to gather the papers.

Maxwell waves him off. “Great. Let me know when you find the part where we’re not completely doomed.”

After Julian steps out, he turns to me with that infuriating grin of his. “So, what’s the deal with Isabel?”

I narrow my eyes. “What do you mean?”

“She’s been awfully quiet lately. I figured maybe you finally scared her off.”

“Don’t be an idiot.”

“Relax.” He holds up his hands, his grin widening. “I’m just asking. When’s the last time you even saw her?”

The question hits harder than I expect. I clench my jaw, forcing my expression to stay neutral. “It’s been a couple weeks.”

Not since the basement.

I tell myself it’s because I’ve been busy. There is too much on my plate to waste time thinking about her.

That’s a lie.

The truth is, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about her. The way she looked on her knees, eyes glossy, cheeks flushed from the sharp bite of my palm. The way my cock strained against my slacks at the sight of her, the way she submitted beneath my hands despite the defiance still burning in her gaze. I’ve thought about putting her back in that position, about going further, taking everything I know she’s afraid to admit she wants.

But I can’t allow myself that yet.

Maxwell raises an eyebrow, clearly surprised. “Weeks? Didn’t think you had it in you to stay away that long.”

I don’t respond. He doesn’t need to know the distance is calculated, that every second away from her has only fueled my obsession.

Instead, I watch him. He’s fishing for something.

“Is there something wrong with her?”

Maxwell shakes his head. “She’s fine.”

“Max.” My voice is flat.

He exhales, raking a hand through his hair. “She has been having nightmares, wakes up crying sometimes.”

That’s why I’ve caught him sneaking down the hall almost every night. He’s been going to comfort her.

A strange sensation settles in my chest, something dark and possessive, but it’s not jealousy.

Maxwell stands, stretching dramatically, like he just finished a hard day’s work. “Well, on that note, I think I’m going to crash. Or at least try to, assuming I don’t dream about ritual sacrifices or creepy old cults.”

“Goodnight, Maxwell,” I say flatly, not looking up. My mind is elsewhere, fixated on the fact that Isabel has been in distress while I’ve been keeping my distance.

And on the fact that I don’t want to stay away anymore.

Moments later, the door clicks shut.

I turn to my desk and press the hidden switch. The monitor comes to life, and the feed turns on, showing Isabel’s room. She’s asleep, curled up on her side, her chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm.

Something’s different tonight. I can’t just sit here and watch her. There’s a knot in my chest, twisting tighter with every passing second.

Before I can think it through, I shut off the feed and head upstairs.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

Isabel’s room is locked.

I try the handle once, twice, before exhaling through my nose.

I pull out my keys, the metal cool against my fingers as I find the one I need. With a quiet *snick*, the lock gives way, and I push the door open.

Isabel is sprawled on the bed, the blanket barely covering her, hanging off one side of the mattress. She sleeps carelessly, oblivious to the world—oblivious to *me*.

My eyes rake over her, taking in every detail—the way the moonlight casts shadows over her tanned skin, the soft curve of her lips, the delicate rise and fall of her chest. She’s beautiful in a way that feels almost unreal, and for a moment, I let myself admire her without restraint.

My cock twitches at the sight, my pants feeling too tight.

I step closer, the floorboards groaning under my weight. She stirs slightly but doesn’t wake.

Standing at the edge of the bed, I reach down and lift the edge of the blanket, moving it aside slowly so I don’t disturb her. Her lashes flutter, as if she’s lost in some dream.

I crouch beside her, my face at level with hers, close enough to feel the faint warmth of her breath. She shifts, her nightgown riding higher up her thighs, exposing more of her taut body. My gaze follows the curve of her legs, the bare expanse of her skin.

Fuck.

She’s not wearing anything underneath.

A spark of heat coils low in my stomach. My fingers twitch, the urge to reach out almost overwhelming. My hands linger just above her, savoring the proximity.

I stay there for a moment longer, watching Isabel, my mind racing with thoughts I should suppress. My fascination with her is obsessive; I should stop pretending otherwise. She's mine, whether she knows it yet or not.

Every part of me longs to claim her.

There's no denying it now; my desire for Isabel is consuming. I feel it in my chest, low and insistent, spreading through me until it reaches every inch of my body.

I can't look away. My pulse pounds in my ears, and my cock aches painfully against the confines of my trousers.

I edge closer, careful not to wake her, but in the back of my mind, I wonder if she would mind if she did wake.

The thought spurs me on, my restraint slipping with each passing second. I tug at my belt, freeing myself from the unbearable tightness. The relief is immediate, but it only heightens the hunger coursing through me.

She shifts again, her lips parting as a soft sigh escapes her.

Fuck it.

Bringing my hand to the base of my cock, I begin to move my palm against the veiny skin.

My heartbeat quickens, a rush of pleasure flooding through me.

Tracing the curve of her body with my gaze, I feel an overwhelming urge to touch her.

I gently part her legs, taking in the sight before me. Her pussy is bare, plump and… fucking wet.

Oh, my little siren. What secrets do your dreams hold?

I continue to torment myself, pushing closer to the edge but refusing to let it consume me just yet. The urge to slip my cock inside her overwhelms me, but I force myself to hold back. This is not how I want to fill her for the first time.

But I need to touch her, even if it's just for a moment.

I suck on my thumb and lower it to her entrance, taking some of her arousal up to her clit. Isabel's body twitches, a quiet moan slipping from her lips, and the sound sends a jolt of heat straight to my cock.

Rubbing delicate circles over her pussy, I feel my climax building in my core.

This time, I don’t stop. I rub my dick in an assaulting pace, feeling the tingle of my orgasm cresting.

I let my cum spill all over Isabel’s bare cunt.

She stirs, and my heart pounds violently in my chest as I gaze at my perfect siren, her body marked with my seed. Satisfaction reverberates deep within me.

I bring my fingers back to her pussy, slowly shoving my cum inside her.

Mine.

The plan had been clear—use Isabel as a sacrifice to finally rid myself of my adoptive father. That was all it was supposed to be. But with Lionel dead and her here, in my possession, something inside me shifts.

The thought of letting her go now feels... impossible.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

ISABEL

I wake up with a strange feeling.

My body feels stiff, my skin damp with sweat, but it's not the usual discomfort of waking up in a place that isn't mine. Something is off.

My first thought is that Maxwell came into my room again. He's been pushing boundaries, testing my limits, but I swore I locked my door last night.

Still groggy, I turn my head toward the door—

It's cracked open.

Motherfucker.

I throw the blanket off, ready to march out and berate him for breaking into my room again, when a sensation between my legs makes me freeze. Sticky. Warm. My thighs press together, and I inhale sharply.

What the fuck?

Panic flutters in my chest, but I force myself to breathe. Did he—? No. He wouldn't dare.

I shake my head, trying to push past the bizarre thought that maybe I had a dream I can't remember. It has to be in my head. Too much time in captivity, too much stress. My mind is playing tricks on me.

I run a hand through my tangled hair and swing my legs over the edge of the bed, but my eyes catch something near the window: another drawing of me, carefully placed on the small wooden table. Next to it, I see something familiar.

I scowl before even picking it up.

A note is tucked beneath it in Julian’s handwriting. *Got you some more obleas, since you seem to like them.*

One day, I’d found a package of the thin wafer cookies filled with creamy dulce de leche sitting on the kitchen counter and devoured them before I even realized I was hooked. I’d never tasted anything like them before.

And then it kept happening. Every time I finished a pack, another would appear.

I grip the note so tightly; it crumples at the edges.

It’s embarrassing, knowing Julian noticed.

Enough.

Enough of the games, the stolen moments, the pathetic attempts to make this place feel *normal* when nothing about this is normal.

I shove away from the bed, stomping toward the door, my bare feet slapping against the cold wood floor. Anger fuels me as I storm through the hall, down the stairs, and straight into the kitchen, where the three brothers stand like it’s just another day.

Like they didn’t *kidnap* me.

Like they didn’t *steal* months of my life.

Like I don’t dream of sinking a knife into each of them just to see how they’d bleed.

The sound of their conversation grates against my nerves, their casual demeanor making my fury bubble over.

“You think this is normal?” My voice comes out screechy.

Three sets of eyes turn to me.

“You think you can just give me gifts and snacks and expect me to forget what you did?” My pulse roars in my ears. “You *kidnapped* me. You ruined my life. I *hate* you!”

My breath heaves.

None of them speak.

“I wish you were dead.” My voice cracks, but I don’t care. “I wish all of you were fucking dead.”

Silence.

My body trembles from the force of it all, my heart hammering so violently, I feel it in my throat.

And still, they just stand there as if I haven’t just declared war.

I tear up the portrait Julian gave me in half, then into quarters, letting the torn pieces flutter to the floor like dead leaves.

When I look at Julian, emotion flashes across his eyes. It's gone as soon as it appears, but it's there. *Good*.

But it's not enough.

I turn, stalking into the dining room. My fingers curl around the back of a chair, and I lift it and hurl it at the window. The impact rattles through the room, but the glass barely splinters.

"Let me out!" I scream, grabbing the chair again and slamming it against the window, over and over. My throat burns with every desperate, furious cry. "Let me the fuck out!"

Arms wrap around me from behind, locking me in place.

"Calm down," Maxwell murmurs against my ear.

"Don't *touch* me." My voice shatters as I thrash, kicking at his legs, twisting against his grip, but he's stronger.

The fight drains out of me faster than I want it to. A sob claws its way up my throat, and no matter how hard I try to choke it down, it breaks free. My muscles go slack for just a second as he holds me tighter, whispering, "Shhh, just breathe."

Against my better judgment, I do.

I *hate* it.

My body melts into his, his warmth seeping into my bones.

I jerk against him, but he's already lifting me like I weigh nothing. He strides into the living room and lays me down on the couch. Theodore and Julian follow, silently watching from the edges of the room.

Maxwell grabs a blanket from the armrest and drapes it over me, but I shove it away. "Get the fuck away from me!" My throat is raw from screaming. I try to sit up, but my limbs feel sluggish. I open my mouth to yell again, but—

Smack.

The sting explodes across my cheek, silencing me instantly.

Theodore stands over me, his palm still raised, his expression blank. Julian doesn't move. His arms stay crossed, his gaze dark. Maxwell shifts beside me, his jaw clenched.

I barely register the cool air against my skin until I see the way Theodore's eyes dip lower. My stomach lurches.

The thin silk of my nightgown clings to me, and I realize too late that I didn't bother covering myself before storming downstairs.

I grab the blanket and yank it up, my face burning.

Theodore exhales slowly, tilting his head. "On your knees."

I curl my fingers into the fabric, shaking my head. "No."

His eyes glint with something cold. "You know what happens when you disobey."

My heart hammers, but I stay rooted to the couch.

Smack.

This time, the slap is harder, sending my head snapping to the side. I taste the copper and metallic flavor of my blood. I suck in a breath, my tongue running along the inside of my lip.

Maxwell makes a sound.

I glance at him, and something in his expression unnerves me.

His pupils are blown wide, his breathing uneven. He kneels in front of me, his gaze locked onto my mouth. I freeze as he lifts his hand, swiping his thumb against my lip, smearing the blood. He brings it to his mouth, sucking it clean.

His lids flutter shut for half a second, and when they open again, there's something feral in his eyes.

A shiver licks down my spine.

He pulls a knife from his pocket, flicking it open with ease. The silver edge glints as he drags the tip lightly down the column of my throat, with just enough pressure to make me feel it, to remind me how easy it would be.

"You should listen to Theodore," he whispers. "Because he's not the only one who likes to play."

My body betrays me, my pulse pounding in places it shouldn't. I should be disgusted, but instead, there's a slow, insidious warmth curling in my stomach, tangling with my rage.

I don't want to feel this.

"On your knees, Siren. In front of Julian."

When Theodore gives the order once again, I don't fight. My limbs move on their own, traitorous and weak, as I sink down in front of Julian.

Julian watches me, and I force myself to hold his gaze, but something in my chest twists when I do.

The torn portrait still litters the floor, fragments of the image he created for me. Of *me*.

Guilt knots in my throat. I don’t know why—it’s not like I asked for it. But still, the destruction of something so intentionally made sits heavy inside me.

Theodore takes a seat on the couch behind me, his voice cutting through the haze. “Unbutton his pants.”

My shoulders stiffen, my hands clenched in my lap. “No.”

Maxwell moves behind me. The air shifts as he leans in, his breath warm against my ear.

His fingers thread through my hair, gripping firm. Then, the cold kiss of steel presses against my chest, just above my racing heart.

“Do it, *Starling*,” he murmurs, voice like a blade wrapped in velvet. “Fighting it won’t do you any good. Do it, or you can keep testing my patience.”

My hands tremble as my fingers brush against the button of Julian’s slacks. The moment I graze his crotch, I catch the slight hitch in his breathing. His jaw ticks and his shoulders tense. He’s so hard beneath the fabric, there’s a darkened patch where his arousal has seeped through.

A pulse of heat licks through me. It’s humiliating. My lips part, and before I can stop myself, I drag my tongue across the bottom one, my mouth suddenly dry.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Shame floods my veins, making my stomach churn. I drop my gaze, clenching my fists in my lap. I don’t want to see their faces or acknowledge the way my body is reacting to this.

Maxwell’s grip tangles deeper in my hair, tilting my head back until my eyes snap to his. The glint of amusement in his eyes makes my skin itch.

“Don’t get shy on us now,” he murmurs with a teasing drawl. “Go on. Pull him out.”

Julian hasn’t moved an inch, but his breathing isn’t as steady as before. His body is betraying him just as much as mine, and the knowledge makes my pulse skitter.

Theodore sighs, sounding unimpressed. “You wanted to throw a tantrum? Then own it.” He leans forward. “It’s time to apologize for tearing up his gift to you.” A pause. “Put him in your mouth. I want you to taste him.”

I shake my head. I can’t do it.

Silence stretches between us, and then Maxwell hums, the sound laced with mockery. “Do you need help, Starling?”

Julian’s fingers flex against his thighs as Theodore’s lips twitch at the corner, something smug curving at the edges.

I don’t know what Maxwell intends to do until I feel him move. He grabs Julian’s cock and brings it to his own mouth, slinking his lips down the shaft. Julian inhales sharply and tips his head back.

Theodore lets out a low whistle, leaning back against his seat, his hands moving to adjust himself in his pants. “This is about to be a great show,” he muses.

Oh my God.

Maxwell sucks on Julian’s dick for a few more strokes before he puts the crown at my mouth. Against my better judgment, I open and allow him in.

I don’t know when I lost control. Maybe I never had it to begin with.

Julian groans above me, his fingers threading into my hair, guiding me. My throat constricts as heat floods my face.

I should fight this, but instead, I’m drowning in sensation, in the pleased hum that rumbles through Julian’s chest, in the way Maxwell’s fingers skim my shoulder, like he’s savoring the moment.

“Look at you,” Theodore says. He’s still seated, watching in *triumph*. “You’re so much prettier when you’re obedient.”

My instinct is to spit something vicious back at him, but my words get stuck behind the lump in my throat.

I feel a strong tug at my dress, and cool air brushes my skin. Before I can react, Maxwell kneels by my side and presses close, his breath fanning against my collarbone. A shudder wracks my spine when his lips graze my bare skin, trailing lower until he reaches my exposed breast.

When he takes my nipple into his mouth, I gasp. I don’t know where to focus—the solid warmth of Julian’s body in front of me, his thick cock between my lips, the teasing suckles of Maxwell’s mouth on my tits, or the weight of Theodore’s gaze, tracking every reaction like he’s ready to jump in at any moment.

“I want you to touch yourself,” Theodore orders.

I don’t respond, too caught up in sensation, barely hearing his voice over the rush of blood in my ears.

Cold steel presses against my throat. Maxwell doesn’t stop his slow exploration, his tongue running laps around my nipple, but the blade in his hand is a silent warning.

Tears burn at the corners of my eyes, spilling over before I can stop them.

Julian exhales sharply, his grip tightening in my hair. My body feels like it’s burning, every nerve alight, trapped between shame and arousal. He begins to fuck my mouth relentlessly, not letting me up for air.

And I take it.

My fingers trail down my stomach until they reach my center, and I spread my legs wide to rub circles over my clit as I moan.

Theodore watches, smug and satisfied. “That’s it. Good girl. Don’t stop.”

His words turn me on tenfold.

The way the brothers talk to me, the filth dripping from their lips like honey-coated sin, only fuels the blaze curling low in my belly.

Julian groans above me, his grip tightening in my hair, guiding me faster, rougher. His breaths come out uneven, and when I glance up through my lashes, his lips are parted, eyes glazed with pleasure.

“You feel that, Starling?” Maxwell purrs, the knife still pressed lightly to my throat. His free hand moves lower, trailing heat along my skin. “That’s power. Having him like this, desperate for you... Doesn’t that make you wet?”

Theodore chuckles. “She’s soaked,” he drawls. “I can fucking smell it.”

I whimper, my thighs pressing together involuntarily.

Maxwell tsks. “You’re already putting on such a pretty show for us. Might as well go all in.”

“Keep touching yourself, Isabel. Make yourself come while your mouth is full,” Theodore commands.

My skin burns, my mind screaming at me to stop, but my body obeys.

I moan around Julian’s cock, the vibrations making him grunt, his fingers tightening on my scalp. The pleasure between my legs builds fast, a sinful ache that coils tighter with every filthy word dripping from their mouths.

“Such a good little whore,” Theodore muses. “All that screaming and fighting just to end up like this—on your knees, swallowing cock like you were made for it.”

Heat sears through me, my cheeks burning, but the shame only adds to the unbearable throbbing between my thighs.

Maxwell chuckles, his breath tickling my ear as the cold edge of the knife trails lower, teasing along my collarbone. “You love it, don’t you?” His tongue flicks out, wetting my skin. “Say it.”

I shake my head, muffled protests lost around Julian’s throbbing length.

Maxwell laughs. “Still lying to yourself, Starling? That’s cute.”

Julian curses under his breath, his hips jerking, his restraint slipping. His other hand joins the first in my hair, forcing me down further, making me take all of him. I gag, tears spilling over my cheeks, but my pussy clenches at the way he’s using me, the way they’re watching.

“Fuck, she’s perfect,” Julian groans, his voice strained. “So fucking warm.”

Theodore hums, eyes locked on me like I’m something to be studied. “You want to come, don’t you?”

I squeeze my thighs together, my fingers rubbing tight circles over my clit. I hate how close I am, how much their words are pushing me over the edge.

Maxwell grips my chin, forcing me to look up. “Beg for it.”

I shake my head again, desperate to hold on to whatever self-control I have left.

Theodore grins, dark and knowing. “Then don’t.” He leans forward, voice dropping to a whisper. “But you will eventually.”

Maxwell presses the knife flat against my chest, with just enough pressure to make my pulse spike. “Come, Starling,” he coaxes. “Come like the desperate little creature we know you are.”

Julian thrusts deep one last time, groaning as he spills down my throat. The sensation, the taste of him, the way Maxwell’s words scrape over my skin like sin and salvation—I break.

Pleasure crashes into me, my body trembling as I moan around Julian’s cock, my release tearing through me as I fall apart right there on my knees.

I try to catch my breath, my body still trembling.

Theodore watches me like a predator who just finished his meal, lazily dragging his thumb across his bottom lip. “Look at you. Fucking ruined. You finally understand your place, don’t you?”

I grit my teeth, refusing to give him the satisfaction of an answer.

Maxwell smirks, reaching out to tilt my chin up with two fingers. “Still got some fight left in you? Good. I like breaking things slowly.”

Julian exhales sharply, his voice raw. “She’s beautiful like this.” His fingers trail down my arm, barely touching, but the heat of it brands me. “Soft. Shaken. Needy.”

I yank away, my skin burning, but the way they’re looking at me—like they already own me—makes my stomach tighten.

Theodore leans in, his breath warm against my ear. “You can try to hate us all you want, little siren,” he whispers, his voice a velvet knife, “but your body begs for us.”

Maxwell chuckles darkly, his eyes gleaming. “And we love watching you fall apart.”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

She hasn’t left her room in over a week, Theo. We fucking broke her,” Julian argues.

I twirl in my chair until I’m facing the office windows. Beyond the glass, the courtyard stretches out, nothing but empty space where the mansion once stood. A hollow grave.

Julian’s voice grates against my brain—not because he’s wrong, but because I’ve been thinking the same thing. Isabel hasn’t stepped foot outside her room since the night we cornered her in the living room. She hasn’t screamed at us, hasn’t thrown things, hasn’t even tried to fight. Silence isn’t like her. The Isabel we took was loud, reckless, clawing for freedom with everything she had.

This Isabel is a ghost.

Maxwell is slouched on the couch, flipping a knife between his fingers with a lazy expression. “You’re acting like we should feel bad about it.”

Julian shoots him a glare. “You don’t?”

Maxwell hums, pressing the flat of the blade to his mouth in mock thought. “I feel… unsettled.” He smirks. “That counts for something, right?”

Julian turns back to me. “We need to do something.”

I drum my fingers against the desk, weighing my options.

Pushing up from my seat, I run a hand through my hair and walk out of the office, tugging at my sweater to release the invisible wrinkles.

The sound of quiet sobs seeps through the wooden door when I get to Isabel’s room. I exhale slowly, pressing my palm against the doorframe.

She’s breaking.

I should let her. It would make things a lot easier for us.

Instead, I do the one thing I shouldn’t.

“Isabel.”

The crying cuts off abruptly, but I know she’s still there, just beyond this door. I can picture her curled up in bed, arms wrapped around herself, eyes red and swollen. The thought unsettles me.

It’s the same position she has been in since she stumbled back into this room after our little *group activity.*

The hidden camera tucked into the corner of the ceiling shows me everything. How she barely moves, how she stares blankly at the wall for hours, how she only drags herself out of bed when necessary. It’s like the fight in her has been drained, her fire reduced to dying embers.

And for some reason, it makes my stomach twist in a way I don’t fucking like.

I lean against the door, voice quieter. “You can talk to me.”

A bitter laugh. “Talk to you?” Her voice is hoarse, like she hasn’t used it in days. “What could we possibly talk about, Theodore?”

I hesitate before answering. “Whatever you want.”

Silence.

Then, softer, “Let me go.”

A muscle in my jaw ticks. I close my eyes.

She’s the only person who could ask me that and almost get away with it.

Because she’s the only person I have a soft spot for.

It’s dangerous, this pull I feel toward her. It goes against everything I’ve built myself to be. But there’s something about her that makes me hesitate —something that reminds me of myself in ways I don’t want to admit.

“I can’t,” I finally say.

Her sharp inhale is loud in the quiet hallway. “Why?”

I could lie, tell her it’s because of the deal we made, because she’s a loose end we can’t afford to let slip through our fingers. But instead, I tell her the truth.

“Because we need you.”

She scoffs. “For what? To keep your bed warm?”

The corner of my mouth twitches. “Tempting, but no.” I let the silence stretch before I continue. “You want to know why we need you? Fine. You

deserve that much."

I press my forehead against the door, voice dropping lower. "I was an orphan, left at an orphanage as a baby. No name, no history. I don't remember *anything*."

She doesn't respond, but I hear her shift, like she's moving closer.

"We've spent our whole lives chasing ghosts, Isabel. The Whitmores raised us with secrets. And those secrets? They lead back here. To Vanguard. To the things my family buried deep enough that most people would rather pretend they never existed." My fingers tighten against the doorframe. "We're trying to dig them back up. And we need you to do it."

A long pause. Then, quietly, "Why me?"

"Because you're a thread in the middle of all of this. Whether you want to admit it or not, you're part of this now. And I think…" I trail off, my mind racing with everything I *suspect* but can't prove yet. "I think you're connected to this more than you realize."

Another pause.

Then, to my surprise, her voice softens. "I don't know anything about my parents either."

Something in my chest tightens.

For the first time since we took her, she doesn't sound like she hates me.

"We're not so different, then, you and I," I murmur.

She lets out a small breath. "Maybe not."

The fragile moment stretches, a delicate thread between us that could snap at any second.

Then, she sighs. "I still hate you."

I smirk, stepping away from the door. "I'd be disappointed if you didn't."

Palm against the door, I lean in, even though I know she won't do the same. "That's why I need to do this. Because for the first time in my life, I might finally be uncovering who my family truly is."

"I get it," Isabel says. "I really do. But that doesn't change the fact that you're keeping me here against my will."

A bitter smirk tugs at my lips. "What's waiting for you out there, huh?" I ask, forcing my tone to stay even. "A man?"

I know it's pathetic to even ask, but the thought coils hot in my stomach. The idea of her running off to someone else makes my jaw clench.

She scoffs. “No.”

I don’t know why relief washes through me, but I shove the feeling down before it can settle.

“Valeria.”

I nod, even though she can’t see me. “She means a lot to you.”

“She’s the only one who ever truly cared about me,” Isabel says, and there’s fragility in her voice.

“We care about you too, Isabel.”

She lets out a quiet, bitter laugh. “Right. Because kidnapping me, threatening me, and dragging me into this nightmare was all out of care. Don’t say things you don’t mean.”

“I know we’ve given you every reason not to believe that,” I say, stepping closer. “And I’m not asking for your forgiveness—not yet. But I’m telling you the truth.”

She doesn’t respond.

“I’d be lying if I said it was just about the plan now.” I pause, trying to find the words. “You calm something in me I didn’t even know needed calming. You challenge me, infuriate me, and yet when you're near, everything else quiets down. It’s not just that we need you, Isabel. I need you.”

“You don’t get to say that,” she finally whispers. “You don’t get to stand there and act like this is something real when you’re part of the reason I can’t sleep at night.”

I take the hit.

“You don’t get to want things, Theodore. Not when you’ve taken so much from me,” Isabel argues, exhaling sharply. “You want peace?” she continues. “Then maybe you should’ve left me alone. Maybe you should’ve let me live my life instead of dragging me into yours.”

I take a breath, the weight of her words pressing down on me like a stone to the chest.

“You’re right,” I say. “I don’t deserve your trust. But I’m not going to lie to you to make this easier. I just want you to know it’s the truth, even if it’s still a nightmare for you.”

Isabel remains quiet behind the door.

It’s been days with her locked away in that damn room, only acknowledging our existence by taking the food we leave at her door. At

least she's eating now, but that's not enough. She needs more than this self-imposed isolation. "Come out, Isabel."

More silence.

I try again. "Please."

A pause. "What's the point?" She sighs, and I can hear the exhaustion in it. "It's not like I can go outside anyway."

Something in my chest twists. She's not wrong. She's been a prisoner in this house since the moment we took her, no matter how much freedom we've allowed her within these walls.

"You don't have to stay locked in there," I argue, my voice rougher than I intend. "At least come downstairs."

Nothing.

I close my eyes, gripping the back of my neck. I could force the door open, drag her out if I must, but I don't want to do that.

I don't want to break her any more than we already have.

"Come out, Isabel," I say again, softer this time. "Please."

"Just go, Theodore."

I don't move right away. My hand is still on the door, my fingers pressing into the wood as if I can reach through it, as if I can force her to change her mind by sheer will alone.

"Isabel."

"Leave." There's no anger in her tone, no fire. And somehow, that's worse.

For the first time in a long time, I feel… defeated.

I drag a hand down my face before forcing myself to step away. My body is heavy as I turn, my mind screaming at me to make her listen.

Without another word, I walk away.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

ISABEL

I listen to Theodore's footsteps retreat, each one echoing in my chest, making my ribs feel like they're caving in. He hesitated. I could hear it in his breath and the way his weight shifted outside the door. For a second, I thought he might push his way inside, force me to face him.

But he left.

I should feel victorious, but I don't. I should relish the fact that I made Theodore Whitmore walk away. Instead, I just feel… hollow. His admission —the raw confession that he needs me—has left me reeling. I can hardly believe it, and now I'm in shambles, the weight of his words shattering whatever resolve I had left.

I'm back in bed, curled up in the same position I've been in for days, limbs stiff, my body aching in places I didn't even know could hurt. It's pathetic, I know it is. But what's the alternative? Wander around this house like I belong here? Like they didn't steal me away and strip me of my choices?

The tray of food they left me this morning sits untouched by the window. I should eat, but I can't bring myself to move.

I hate this. I hate how quiet everything feels again now that Theodore is gone.

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing slumber to take me under. Maybe if I sleep long enough, I'll wake up in my own bed, in my own life, with no Whitmore brothers to haunt me.

What a joke. I know I'm not getting out of this so easily.

I roll onto my back, staring up at the ceiling.

The idea of stepping outside this room feels pointless.

It's not like I can go anywhere. And worse—I don't know if I even *want* to.

A wave of nausea rolls through me when I think about facing them. The shame burns hot and deep, simmering beneath my skin like an infection.

How could I let them do that to me? How could I let *myself* fall apart like that in front of them?

I press my palms over my eyes, blocking out the memory, but it's useless. It keeps replaying, every sensation still raw and vivid. The way they touched and looked at me like they *owned* me…

I hate them for taking me. I *loathe* them for keeping me here and treating me like some kind of plaything they can tease and break apart.

But I hate myself even more for how much I *liked* it.

My body betrayed me. Even when my mind screamed at me to resist, my body melted, craved, *begged*. I can still feel Julian's fingers in my hair, the ghost of Maxwell's breath against my skin, the weight of Theodore's stare watching me unravel.

I made a spectacle of myself. Weak. Brittle. *Needy.*

Fuck my life.

My stomach twists in knots, shame curling in my gut like a viper.

I should have fought harder. Instead, I let them reduce me to nothing but gasps, moans, and trembling limbs.

As much as I *enjoyed* it, I can't shake the feeling of being used.

It makes me sick.

I don't belong to them, and yet, they made me feel like I did, like I had no choice but to submit.

How the hell am I supposed to walk out of this room and look them in the eye after that?

I let out a slow, unsteady breath, blinking at the ceiling. I don't know how to reconcile the warring parts of myself—the part that still *wants* them, that aches for their touch even as I drown in shame, and the part that knows better.

This isn't normal.

I roll onto my side, curling in on myself.

It's safer here.

At least in this room, I can pretend none of it ever happened. Here, I still belong to *myself*.

My eyes squeeze shut, but it doesn’t help.

I let out a groan.

The memory of Theodore’s voice through the door won’t leave me alone. *I was an orphan. Both parents dead. Left as an infant.*

A week ago, I wouldn’t have cared. But now, it sits heavy in my chest in a way I don’t want to analyze. Because I get it. I know what it’s like to be left behind, to have no history, no past to claim as your own. No matter how much I hate him for what he’s done, that part of his story is something I can’t ignore.

Still, it doesn’t excuse his behavior. None of this does.

Yet something shifts inside me. Not enough to forgive, but enough to reconsider.

I drag a hand down my face, sighing. I didn’t ask to be a part of this, but I am, and if there’s even the slightest chance I can help put an end to it, then maybe…

Maybe I should.

I sit up. I can do something.

Swinging my legs over the edge of the bed, I push to my feet and move toward the small table near the window. I pull open the drawer and sift through its contents, fingers closing around a notebook and a couple of pens. This will do.

I drop into the chair and flip open the first blank page, tapping the pen against the lined paper. Then, I start writing.

Page after page, I scribble down every scrap of information I’ve gathered—everything the brothers have told me, things I’ve overheard. I piece it together like a puzzle, forming a rough picture of the truth lurking beneath the surface of Vanguard, of the Whitmores, of *all* of it.

My hand cramps from how fast I’m moving, but I don’t stop. I *can’t* stop. This is what I do best. *This* is how I fight.

By the time I set the pen down, my heart is racing.

This isn’t much, but it’s a start.

I close the notebook and run my fingers over the cover, exhaling deeply. The weight that has been pressing down on me for the past week doesn’t feel as suffocating anymore.

I push back from the table and stand.

My stomach growls, and my eyes flick to the food tray that has been sitting there for hours. The bread roll on the plate is probably cold and stale,

but I don’t care. I snatch it up and take a bite, the taste dry but satisfying.

This time, I don’t forget to cover myself. I grab a sweater and a pair of joggers from the pile of clothes they’ve left for me and slip them on. They’re not mine, but they fit well enough.

I can only assume this was Julian’s doing. He’s such a *care bear*.

The thought softens something in my chest, but I shake my head quickly to push it away.

No, Isabel. You don’t trust them. They are your enemies.

I steel myself, straighten my shoulders, and move toward the door.

When I round the corner into the living room, gripping the notebook tight in my hand, the familiar buzz of a tattoo gun hums through the space, vibrating in my bones.

Theodore is seated in an armchair, one leg crossed over the other, a book open in his lap. He doesn’t even acknowledge me at first, too absorbed in whatever he’s reading.

Julian is crouched low, his expression one of pure focus as he works, the tattoo gun steady in his gloved hand. A disposable barrier sheet covers the couch beneath them, and a small workstation is set up beside Julian with an array of ink caps, a tattoo machine resting on a sterile pad, and antiseptic wipes. His brows are knit together, jaw tight in concentration.

Maxwell is sprawled across the couch, arms tucked behind his head. His shirt is discarded, exposing the defined lines of his abdomen, leading down to the fresh ink Julian is carving just above his pelvic bone. His eyes are closed, the ghost of a smirk playing on his lips, like he’s enjoying the pain.

The vision of all three of them like this—completely at ease, in their element—sends a sharp, unwelcome buzz through my body.

It’s unfair how attractive they are. Seeing them like this immediately reminds me of the last time I was here with them.

I clench my jaw and force the memory back, pushing the shame and heat deep down where it belongs. I won’t let myself go there again.

Instead, I move straight to the kitchen and slam my notebook down onto the island. The sound barely startles them, but it’s enough to draw their attention.

Theodore looks up slowly before closing his book.

Julian’s gaze flicks to me briefly before returning to his work, unbothered.

Maxwell is the only one who reacts fully. His eyes open, amusement flickering in them as he tilts his head to the side, stretching like a fucking cat.

“Took you long enough, Starling,” he drawls.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

MAXWELL

Isabel is finally out of her cave.

She looks different. Not physically—physically, she's still a walking contradiction of defiance and hesitation, like she can't decide if she wants to stab me or crawl into my lap. But emotionally, there's a clear shift.

The fire in her eyes isn't just anger anymore.

Isabel stands there, stiff-backed and scowling, her hands curled into fists at her sides like she's bracing for a fight, like we didn't already break her open and see what's inside.

I wonder if she hates herself for it…

If she hates *us* more.

She doesn't answer me right away, which is fine. I like watching her squirm.

Instead, she drags a deep breath in through her nose and steps forward, shoving a notebook onto the kitchen island like it personally offended her. The slap of paper against marble echoes through the open space, but none of us startle.

She's the only one with something to prove.

I stretch my arms out further behind my head, letting my fingers lace together as I sprawl deeper into the couch just as Julian takes a break from inking my skin. "Well, well. The dead rises."

"I want in," Isabel blurts out.

I let my eyes drag lazily over her, taking in the way her sweater hangs off her frame, the joggers barely clinging to her hips. She covered up this time, hiding the body I've already memorized, but it doesn't matter.

I know what's underneath.

"Into what, Starling?" I ask, feigning boredom.

Her glare sharpens. "Don't play dumb."

I flash a grin. "But it's so fun."

Theodore sighs from his chair, already looking like he regrets letting me speak. Julian doesn't acknowledge her at all, too focused on the piece he's working on, but I can tell he's listening.

Isabel's jaw clenches. "I want to help."

I exhale a short laugh, shaking my head. "That's cute."

Her glare sharpens, but I don't let her get a word in before I continue, voice dripping with amusement. "You sure you don't just want a new tattoo?" I drag my hand down my torso. "I was told you were pretty interested in Julian's work last time."

Her nostrils flare. "That's not what I meant."

I grin. "Shame. It would've been nice to brand you that way." I glance at Julian, who's still focused on my skin but not oblivious to the game I'm playing. "Right, Juju?"

He doesn't answer, but the corner of his mouth twitches.

I push further, just to watch the heat creep up her neck. "But it's okay, Starling. We can find other ways to mark you as our own."

Isabel's breath stutters for half a second, and then she folds her arms, jaw set.

Theodore finally moves, reaching for the notebook. He flips it open, skimming her words. "So you've finally come to your senses."

Her chin lifts. "I can expose them. And your father."

"Very well, then. Tomorrow, you shall accompany us to your old workplace."

Isabel scoffs. "You sound like an aristocratic asshole." Then, she blinks. Once. Twice. "Wait… what?"

I smirk at the way her eyes widen, at the slight hitch in her breath. *She wasn't expecting that.*

Theodore chuckles, closing the notebook. "You thought we'd keep you locked away forever?"

Isabel's mouth opens then shuts. She looks between the three of us, like she's waiting for the punchline. "You're letting me leave?"

"With supervision, of course."

“Of course,” she echoes, still clearly stunned. Then, something in her expression shifts. Her brows knit, suspicion creeping in. “Wait… what do you mean, *old* job?”

I let out a quiet laugh. “Do you really think you’re still an employee of Vanguard?”

Her arms tighten around herself. “Why not?”

Theodore leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Because you work personally for *us* now.”

“Excuse me?” Isabel exclaims.

I hum, enjoying every second of this. “You wanted to help, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts,” I interrupt. “After the stunt Valeria pulled, you’re already on the council’s radar, Isabel. And if you think we’re letting you out of our sight just to go running back to her, you’re not as smart as I thought.”

Her lips press into a thin line. She wants to argue. I can see it in the way her hands twitch, the way her nails dig into her arms, like she’s holding herself together by sheer force of will.

Julian lifts his gaze from my tattoo. “Be ready by nine tomorrow morning,” he tells her simply. “You’ll be riding with me.”

He then grabs a paper towel, dousing it with green soap before swiping it over the fresh ink on my skin. The sting is a sharp, satisfying burn, and I hiss through my teeth.

I tilt my head, admiring Julian’s latest masterpiece. It’s flawless. He freestyled the design—something he has done for me before—but this one feels poetic.

A skull grins up at me, wide and maniacal, its teeth exaggerated into sharp points. One hollow eye socket is stretched into something almost comically large, the other crossed out like a dead cartoon character. A jester’s hat sits crooked on its head, the fabric torn, bells hanging from the ends, as if they’ve long since rusted silent. Below the skull, in sharp, looping script, are the words: *Laugh while you can*.

“Quit squirming,” Julian mumbles.

I smirk, tilting my head back against the couch. “Who’s squirming? I’m savoring.”

Julian huffs, shaking his head as he grabs another paper towel, pressing it down over the ink to soak up the excess.

Isabel watches from where she stands, arms still folded, but there's curiosity in her gaze now. She's studying Julian as he works—the way he wipes away the ink, checking his lines, the way he moves with precision. Theodore is watching too.

"Bet you'd savor anything if Julian was the one giving it to you," Theodore quips.

A slow grin spreads across my face. "Maybe. Depends on what he's offering."

Across the room, Isabel sighs, like she regrets all her life choices that led her to this moment.

Julian reaches for the clear bandage. "Try not to get it infected," he commands dryly, pressing it over the fresh ink.

"Please," I scoff. "You know you love babying me."

He presses the bandage down harder than necessary, making me suck in a sharp breath, then peels off his gloves and tosses them aside.

Isabel snorts, and I catch the sound. "What's funny, Starling?"

She shakes her head, biting back a smirk.

I grin, tilting my head. "Oh, sweetheart. If you wanted to play nurse, all you had to do was ask."

"That's funny, 'cause I was just thinking about smothering you in your sleep," she bites back.

I grin, tapping my fingers against my stomach. "You'd miss me too much."

Theodore interrupts us. "If you three are done flirting—"

"We weren't flirting," Isabel mutters.

I smirk, stretching my arms behind my head. "No? That's a shame. Almost thought you were going sweet on me for a second."

Julian throws the used paper towel at my face. I laugh, catching it before it hits me.

Isabel huffs and throws us each a withering look before turning on her heel and stalking off, but I stop her in her tracks. "Hold on."

She pauses but doesn't turn around, like she's debating whether she actually has to listen to me. I take my time getting up, stretching lazily before making my way to the dining table. A garment bag is draped over one of the chairs, exactly where I left it earlier. I sling it over my arm and walk toward her, stopping just a few feet away.

"You're coming with me tonight," I say simply, holding out the bag.

That gets her attention. She finally turns, brow furrowed in suspicion as she eyes the bag like it might bite her. “Where?”

I smirk. “Madhouse is hosting its first-ever masquerade ball. And you, Starling, will be my date.”

Isabel blinks. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” I shake the bag slightly, urging her to take it. “Go put this on. You and I are going to have some fun.”

She doesn’t move to take it. Instead, she crosses her arms, glaring at me like I’ve personally offended her. “You can’t be serious.”

“Dead serious.”

Her lips press together, eyes darting toward Theodore and Julian, as if expecting them to say something, to stop me, but they don’t.

Her shoulders tense, like she’s preparing for a fight, but I don’t give her the chance. I step closer, lowering my voice just enough to make it feel intimate. “Come on, Isabel. Don’t tell me you’re scared of a little fun.”

She snatches the bag from my hands with a sharp exhale. “I hate you.”

I grin. “You say that, but I think you’re going to enjoy yourself tonight.”

She doesn’t dignify that with a response. Instead, Isabel turns on her heel again and marches up the stairs, this time without stopping.

I watch her go, already looking forward to whatever the night will bring.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

ISABEL

I storm up the stairs, my fingers tightening around the garment bag as I grumble under my breath. Maxwell's arrogance, his smug little smirks, the way he acts like I belong to him—like I belong to *any* of them—it all drives me insane.

The absolute worst part is, he doesn't even seem to care. He's so nonchalant about it all, like it's just a twisted game.

By the time I reach my room, I'm fuming. I slam the door shut behind me and twist the lock, sealing myself away from their constant overbearing presence. My pulse is still thrumming from the interaction and the way Maxwell looked at me, like he was already picturing me in whatever ridiculous thing he picked out.

I let out a sharp breath before finally unzipping the bag, half expecting something gaudy or absurd just to piss me off, but when I pull the fabric out...

It's beautiful.

The gown is black, deep and rich, with an almost ethereal shimmer, like the night sky captured in silk and tulle. Delicate sparkles cascade down the bodice like tiny fallen stars. The skirt is long, flowing, with layers of fabric that make it look whimsical, like something out of a dark fairy tale. It's elegant yet mischievous. It's… Maxwell.

Damn him.

I bite my lip and run my fingers over the material, unwilling to admit how much I actually like it. Then, I notice the mask tucked beneath it, and I

pull it free. It's silver, intricate, with elegant filigree that swirls out like vines curling over the edges. The eyes are sharp and feline.

It's perfect, and that only pisses me off more.

I toss both items onto the bed and glare at them. Then, a thought creeps in.

They might be keeping me on a short leash, but the masquerade ball *is* an opportunity. Everyone will be dressed up, faces obscured, bodies pressed into a crowd thick with strangers. If I play my cards right, I might be able to slip away.

I chew on the inside of my cheek, considering the risks. Maxwell isn't stupid. He won't let me out of his sight, not for a second, but even he can't control everything, no matter how much he loves to act like he does. If I time it right, wait for the perfect moment, maybe I can disappear into the chaos.

It's not a solid plan. Hell, it's barely a plan at all.

But it's worth a try.

I TAKE ONE LAST LOOK AT MYSELF IN THE MIRROR, HATING THAT I DON'T completely loathe what I see. The gown drapes over my body like liquid night. The mask sits perfectly on my face, concealing just enough with the little makeup they gave me—mascara, blush, lip gloss.

Taking a deep breath, I pull open the door and step out. My heels click softly against the floor as I make my way downstairs, my fingers gripping the railing tighter than necessary.

The moment I reach the landing, I feel their eyes on me.

Julian pauses, his hands in his pockets. Theodore doesn't react at all, but I see the subtle way his gaze lingers, taking me in. And then, there's Maxwell.

My gaze runs over him, taking in his attire for the night—a black tux.

The suit jacket is subtly embroidered with swirling patterns that catch the light when he moves, and the silk lapels are just a shade darker than the rest. His dress shirt is unbuttoned at the collar, revealing a teasing hint of skin and tattoos beneath, and instead of a standard tie, he opted for a black

silk cravat, loosely knotted, like he didn't bother making it perfect on purpose.

His mask covers the upper half of his face, crafted from dark, glossy material, shaped like a clown's visage. It's playful and eerie all at once.

Unlike the gaudy, exaggerated clown masks most would picture, this one is subtle. The eyes are shadowed just enough to make it hard to read his expression, and the mouth is curved in a clownish grin. It's unsettling in the way Maxwell himself is, never quite giving away whether he's laughing *with* you or at you.

Maxwell's head tilts, a slow smirk pulling at his lips. He doesn't bother hiding the way his gaze drags down my body before lazily making their way back up.

"Well, well," he muses, stepping toward me. "Look at you, all dolled up like a pretty little prize." His smirk deepens. "If you keep looking this good, I just might have to keep you on my arm all night."

I freeze, just for a second. His words settle over me. If he keeps me on his arm all night, how the hell am I supposed to get away?

Maxwell notices my hesitation, and his smirk stretches, like he knows exactly what's racing through my mind. However, instead of calling me out, he simply bows, dramatic and mocking, before offering me his hand. "Shall we, Starling?"

I shake off those thoughts and stare at him. "This feels an awful lot like you picking me up for prom."

Maxwell chuckles. "If this were prom, we wouldn't be showing up. We'd be in the back seat of my car right now."

I roll my eyes and brush past him, ignoring the heat that threatens to creep up my neck.

Outside, a sleek black town car idles by the entrance. The driver stands by the door, waiting. Maxwell, ever the gentleman when he wants to be, opens it for me.

"After you," he says smoothly.

I slide in, and Maxwell follows, making sure the skirt of my dress doesn't get caught. The door shuts with a soft thud, sealing us inside.

The car pulls away from the estate, and I stare out the window, forcing myself to focus. This could be my only chance.

After a moment, I turn to Maxwell. "Are Julian and Theodore coming too?"

“They’ll meet us there later.”

I exhale slowly. Good. That means fewer eyes on me for now.

The car rolls to a stop in front of a grungy, weathered building that looks like it has seen better days. The area surrounding it is nearly abandoned, the kind of place that feels forgotten by the rest of the world, though there’s one detail that makes it stand out: the massive circus topper on the roof, its red and white stripes faded with time but still unmistakable.

Maxwell steps out first, offering me his hand, as if this is some kind of grand occasion. I ignore it and step out on my own.

My gaze drifts up to the building again, taking in the details. There are no signs, no neon lights announcing its presence.

When we go through the entrance, I have to stop for a moment. The inside is *nothing* like the exterior. It’s a twisted dream of a circus, dark, decadent, and dripping in extravagance. The air is thick with a mix of smoke, perfume, and something sweet, like caramel and whiskey. Deep red velvet drapes line the walls, pooling onto the floors, and the ceiling is strung with lights that mimic stars. Performers weave through the crowd, their masks elaborate and strange, their outfits ranging from opulent to outright sinful.

A grand chandelier, shaped like a massive, upside-down carousel, spins slowly in the center of the ceiling, its carved horses frozen mid-gallop. The dance floor below is packed with masked bodies moving in sync to the low beat of the music.

It’s mesmerizing, intoxicating, and just the slightest bit *wrong*.

Maxwell steps beside me, leaning in close, his voice a low purr near my ear. “Welcome to Madhouse, Starling.”

IT HAS BEEN AT LEAST AN HOUR SINCE WE ARRIVED AT MADHOUSE, AND Maxwell hasn’t let me leave his side once. He parades me around like some prized possession, introducing me as *Starling* to everyone we meet, never once using my real name. It’s both infuriating and unsettling how easily he falls into this role—smiling, laughing, speaking in that smooth, unbothered tone while keeping me firmly locked in his orbit.

Several people greet him with a grin, calling him *Madcap*. I've never heard that nickname before, but it makes so much sense. It's chaotic, unpredictable, and completely fitting.

I barely pay attention to the introductions, too focused on scanning the room, trying to piece together an escape plan. But Maxwell moves through the space with purpose, checking in with servers, bartenders, and masked performers to ensure everything is running smoothly.

Finally, Maxwell turns to me, a smirk curling his lips. "Drink?"

I hesitate. Losing even an ounce of control in a place like this could be a terrible idea, but I need him to loosen his grip.

"Fine," I say.

He gestures to a passing server, a woman wearing a sleek black mask adorned with tiny silver bells that chime as she moves. She hands him a glass, and he passes it to me. The drink is deep red, almost black, served in a short crystal tumbler over a single, perfectly round ice sphere. It smells like cherries and something smoky. A single black cherry rests at the bottom of the glass.

I lower the glass and glance around, eyes landing on the washroom sign across the room.

Perfect.

I turn to Maxwell. "I need to use the bathroom."

He tilts his head, studying me for a second before nodding. "Alright."

Before I can take a step, he flicks his fingers toward one of the nearby bouncers—a broad-shouldered man in a sleek black suit and a wolfish mask. "Go with her."

I swallow down my frustration and walk away, my so-called escort trailing behind.

The path to the washroom is narrow, winding through the crowd and past small performance stages where masked figures entertain onlookers. A person with white-painted skin and sharp red lips balances on a thin wire above me, holding an open flame in each hand. Another performer, dressed in a tattered harlequin outfit, tilts his head at me as I pass, his mask grotesque and grinning. My skin prickles.

Distracted, I don't notice the woman in front of me until it's too late.

I crash into her, the drink in my hand sloshing, spilling down the front of her crisp white shirt.

"Shit—" I start, eyes wide.

The woman barely reacts. She glances down at the spreading stain, then lifts her gaze to me. Her dark curly hair frames her hidden face, her full lips painted a deep plum. Tattoos peek through the open collar of her button-up shirt, over her collarbones and down her hands. Unlike the other women here, she's in an immaculately tailored suit.

I swallow hard. "I am *so* sorry."

A beat of silence. Then, she lifts a single brow.

I let out a breath. "Uh, come with me. I'll help clean it up." I gesture toward the restroom.

She considers me for a moment then nods, following me inside.

This might delay my escape, but leaving someone covered in a whiskey-cherry stain probably wouldn't have been a great start to my night of freedom either.

The bathroom is strangely empty, and I let out a breath of relief. At least I don't have to deal with prying eyes while I clean up my mess.

I discreetly glance around, looking for any possible escape routes.

My eyes scan over the dark floral wallpaper, gold-framed mirrors, and matching sconces.

Bingo.

There's a mid-size, rectangular window near the stalls.

I go to the dispenser and grab a handful of paper towels, wetting them under the sink before turning back to the woman. "Here, let me—"

Before I can dab at the stain on her shirt, she reaches out, catching my wrist in a gentle grip.

"Isabel, it's okay. It was an accident."

What? She knows my name?

I yank my hand back, taking a full step away. My heart hammers as I scan her face, searching for any trace of familiarity beneath the mask.

Then, she lifts her hands, slowly removing it, and a smirk tugs at her lips as she meets my eyes.

"Sorry to freak you out," she says. "You don't know who I am yet." She tilts her head slightly. "I'm Ronnie."

My brows pull together. "Ronnie?"

She offers a small, almost apologetic smile. "Sorry. I'm Camila."

"You mean *Val's* Camila? *You're her?*"

"Yes," she says. "But I go by Verónica now—*or* Ronnie."

I exhale sharply, my mind spinning. "How did you know I'd be here?"

Ronnie leans against the sink, crossing her arms. “We heard it through the grapevine.”

I scoff, shaking my head.

She chuckles before her expression turns serious again. “Ever since the Whitmores took you, Valeria’s been trying to find a way to get you out—without going straight to my brothers.”

Something tightens in my chest.

“She’s been asking around, doing her own detective work.” Her lips twitch. “Val’s persistent, almost annoyingly so. She cornered some Vanguard members at a fancy lunch at The Alabaster Room. You know, that overpriced place where they charge you half a paycheck for a plate the size of a coaster?”

I huff out a small laugh. “Yeah. Sounds about right.”

“She got them talking. Apparently, this event is a big deal for Vanguard.”

I frown. “Okay, but how did you know they’d bring me here?”

Ronnie’s smirk deepens. “I might not have seen my brothers in years, but I *know* them.” She lifts a shoulder in a lazy shrug. “They love parading their women proudly.”

I stiffen at her words, heat creeping up my neck.

I’m *not* their woman.

I don’t belong to them.

But right now, in this dress, on Maxwell’s arm, with a bouncer guarding the door like a fucking leash, doesn’t it look that way?

Ronnie watches me carefully, amusement in her sharp brown eyes. “Touched a nerve, huh?” She crosses her arms, looking far too amused for my liking. “I saw you glancing around for a window. Are you trying to escape?”

I hesitate, but there’s no point in lying. I nod.

Ronnie hums in thought before she leans in slightly. “I’ve studied every exit in this building,” she says, voice low. “That window isn’t your best option. The better one is straight down the corridor, past all the doors, until you reach the very end. There are double doors leading to the back of Madhouse, then another door that leads straight outside.”

My pulse picks up. “And then what?”

Ronnie tilts her head. “Then, you get in the car waiting for you.”

I blink. “What?”

“Valeria’s in a car waiting for you,” she clarifies.

Ronnie watches me carefully as I process the information. She must see the hesitation in my expression, because she sighs. “Look, I’ll distract the bouncer while you run, but you need to be quick about it.”

I chew my lip, eyes darting toward the bathroom door, as if expecting someone to barge in at any second. I want to believe her, but something nags at me. “How do I know you’re who you say you are?”

Ronnie chuckles under her breath, shaking her head. “You’ll just have to trust me,” she says. “But if it helps, look.”

She reaches for her soiled shirt and unbuttons it just enough to expose a tattoo on her collarbone. *Mors tua, vita mea.*

The words knock the air from my lungs.

Valeria has repeated those words to me for years. They’re inked into her ribs, the phrase she clung to while searching for Camila.

“Val said you might ask for proof,” Ronnie laughs.

Before I can say anything, a sharp bang rattles the bathroom door.

“The hell is taking so long?” a gruff voice calls from the other side.

Ronnie’s eyes darken as she steps toward the door. “Hide behind me while I distract him. Are you ready?”

I nod, pulse thrumming in my ears.

Ronnie cracks the door open, stepping out just enough to block the view inside. I hear her talk to the bouncer, her voice casual, but I don’t wait to hear the rest.

I run straight down the corridor, past the doors, with my heart in my throat.

The hallway is a blur as I sprint past couples pressed against walls. Some doors swing open as I pass, revealing glimpses of rooms, but I don’t stop.

My breath saws in and out of my chest as I push forward, my heels echoing against the floor. Then, I finally see the double doors.

I shove through them, stumbling into the empty space beyond. The air is colder here, the music from inside duller. I whip my head left, then right, trying to decide which way to go.

I take off to the left, my gaze darting around, frantic. *Did I go the right way?*

Straight ahead, I see a door marked *EXIT*.

A choked sound escapes me, and relief surges through my body so violently, my knees almost buckle. *It's happening.* I'm really doing it. Freedom.

Just as I reach for the handle, an arm snakes around my waist, yanking me back as I shriek.

The world tilts as I twist in their grip, my heart slamming against my ribs. When I meet the gaze behind the mask, a fresh wave of horror crashes through me. Julian.

I thrash against him, panic clawing up my throat. "No—*no*—"

Somehow, by sheer desperation, I manage to rip myself free. My heels scrape against the floor as I bolt the other way.

Fuck.

I don't dare look back, but I can feel him. He's way too silent, which terrifies me the most. He doesn't yell, doesn't curse, doesn't call for anyone.

He just comes after me.

At the end of the corridor, I notice an unfamiliar door. I head toward it and shove it open.

I take in my surroundings, my breath still coming fast and ragged. This hallway isn't like the others. It's cleaner, more refined. The floors are polished to perfection, and there's a massive mahogany door that looks heavy and imposing. It must be Maxwell's office.

My pulse pounds in my chest as I bolt past it, my only thought being *keep going, keep going, keep going.*

I don't have to look back to know Julian is right behind me, and unlike before, he's gaining on me.

Panic surges up my throat as I push my legs harder, my heels slipping against the slick floor. I'm running out of options until I spot a staircase ahead.

I throw myself down the steps, nearly tripping in my haste.

The deeper I go, the louder the music becomes. The thumping bass rattles my bones.

Shit.

This leads straight back into the club, but that's a good thing. It'll be easier to lose him in a crowd.

The moment my heels hit the bottom step, I'm swallowed into a sea of bodies. People press in on all sides, their laughter and drunken murmurs

washing over me. The heat, the perfume, the sweat—it's all suffocating.

I duck low, weaving between people, trying not to shove too hard or draw attention to myself. I don't know where I'm going, only that I need to move.

When I finally glance over my shoulder, my stomach twists into knots. Julian is gone.

I let out a shaky breath, relief washing over me briefly, but I know better than to celebrate.

He's still here. *They're* still here. Somewhere in this club, they're lurking, watching.

I scan the crowd, searching for any sign of Ronnie, but she's nowhere to be found. I have no idea if she made it out.

A lump forms in my throat. *I was so close.*

Valeria must be heartbroken knowing the plan didn't work out. But at least now, I know for sure she hasn't given up on me.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

I down the last of my whiskey, letting the burn settle in my chest before placing the glass aside. My phone screen still glows with Julian's message.

I chuckle under my breath. Isabel is fucked.

The anticipation sends a tingle down my spine as I push off the bar and move through the crowd. Maxwell is somewhere nearby, probably taking his sweet time, but I'm not waiting.

The entrance to the Hall of Illusions looms before me. Just as I step forward, Maxwell appears at my side, his lips curling into smirk.

"You ready, brother?" he asks, voice laced with amusement.

I nod and huff out a laugh, cracking my knuckles.

Without another word, we step inside.

The moment the doors close behind us, the atmosphere shifts. The music from the club is muffled now, replaced by silence and the echo of our own footsteps bouncing off the glass walls. The maze is lowly lit by bulbs overhead and the occasional pulse of neon casting distorted reflections along the endless corridors.

Isabel is in here somewhere.

We move in sync as we weave through the maze, our reflections multiplying with every turn. The way the mirrors bend and warp our figures is almost hypnotic, but we know better than to be fooled by the illusion.

"Siren," I call out, my voice twisting around itself like a whisper in the dark.

Maxwell chuckles beside me. "Come out, come out, wherever you are."

The sound ricochets off the glass, making it impossible to tell where we actually are. The effect is disorienting.

A figure moves in the reflections ahead, and Julian appears from a corridor to the right, barely sparing a glance at the warped versions of himself in the glass.

“She’s fast, but she’s not faster than us,” he murmurs.

Maxwell grins, adjusting his cufflinks like we’re about to walk into a business deal instead of cornering a runaway. “Poor thing must be terrified.”

I chuckle under my breath. “Good.”

We move as a unit, falling into step with each other as we maneuver through the passageways.

“You ran from Julian, but now, you have all three of us to deal with,” Maxwell taunts.

A soft gasp. A hurried shuffle.

I turn my head just in time to see movement in the mirrors. A sliver of dark fabric disappears around the corner.

I smirk.

Game over, Siren.

“Over there,” I whisper.

The glass walls reflect every angle of us, making it feel like there are a hundred different versions closing in on Isabel. I can hear her now. The sound of her heels tapping against the floor picks up speed, the soft rush of her movements only getting louder as she panics.

“You’ve got nowhere to hide,” Maxwell’s teases.

We follow the sound, weaving between mirrors and disorienting reflections of ourselves. For a moment, I wonder if she’s already slipped through a door we missed, but then I hear a sharp intake of breath followed by the distinct *thud* of her back hitting the glass wall.

“Found you.”

I round the corner just in time to see her, eyes wide and filled with fear. She’s breathing heavy, her hands gripping her dress. Her gaze dances between the three of us, her face pale under the flickering lights. She knows she’s trapped.

I step forward, watching her flinch as my reflection mirrors my every move.

“You should’ve stayed where you were safe,” I say. She doesn’t answer, her lips trembling as she tries to hold herself steady.

Maxwell steps in next to me, the smirk on his lips almost cruel as he looks at Isabel.

Her eyes dart around, looking for any exit, but we’re too close now.

Her hands fly up, slapping at the air in desperate attempts to shove us away. She’s frantic, backing up against the wall, her chest heaving with panic.

I step toward her, keeping my distance just enough to toy with her. I want to see her struggle, to see that defiance in her eyes before it’s finally crushed.

“You think you can fight us?” I murmur, watching the quick rise and fall of her chest. Her eyes flash with something reckless, but she doesn’t get the chance to act.

From my pocket, I pull out a cloth, soft and soaked with a liquid that will do exactly what I need. I press it against Isabel’s nose, my fingers wrapping around her face to hold her still.

Isabel’s eyes widen, and for a split second, she struggles—her hands clawing at my wrist, her feet kicking against the ground, trying to push me away. But I’m firm, not giving her an inch.

Her gasps grow weaker, her body rigid, and for a moment, I think she’s going to fight it longer, that maybe she has more fight in her than I anticipated. Then, her eyelids flutter, and before she can get another breath in, she slumps into me.

Maxwell steps forward, his eyes flashing with approval.

I steady Isabel in my arms, the weight of her now almost dead in my hold.

“Let’s get her out of here,” Julian says, satisfied.

We’ve done it, and now, we can take her back to where she belongs.

Maxwell eyes the unconscious form in my arms. “She’s not going anywhere this time.”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

ISABEL

I wake up in a haze, the world spinning slowly around me as I try to open my eyes. My head is heavy, like I'm underwater, and my eyelids feel like they're made of cement.

My vision blurs, and I think I might drift back to sleep, but the unfamiliar sensation of being restrained jolts me awake.

My arms and legs are pulled apart, stretched unnaturally wide. My body aches from the uncomfortable position, and I feel the cold, sharp bite of metal around my wrists and ankles. Panic claws at me, and I tug hard against the chains, a desperate surge of adrenaline coursing through me.

I can barely see, but I hear my breathing coming in quick, shallow gasps, my chest tightening as reality sinks in: I'm trapped.

I blink rapidly, my eyes still blurry from whatever they've done to me, and try to make sense of my surroundings. The room is dark, the faintest sliver of light coming from a low-hanging lamp in the corner.

Where am I?

I call out, my voice hoarse and trembling. "Help... Help me!"

My voice bounces off the walls, but no one answers. I try again, my throat tight. "Please!"

The sound of footsteps cuts through the silence. My pulse spikes, and I freeze.

The brothers appear from the shadows, their presence like a dark storm. Their figures loom over me, their faces half-hidden by their masquerade masks still in place. I can see the shape of Julian's grin, the way his eyes gleam with something almost... playful.

Maxwell steps forward first, his usual smug smirk curling at the corner of his lips. He looks down at me, his gaze taking in my vulnerable state, and I feel a shudder run down my spine.

“Nice try. We knew you’d try to escape, but you really thought you could get away from us?”

I clench my jaw, struggling again against the chains, feeling the burn in my muscles as I pull harder. “What the hell did you do to me?” My voice shakes, the panic rising like a tidal wave in my chest. “Did you drug me?”

Theodore steps up beside Maxwell. There’s no remorse in his eyes, just a strange satisfaction as he regards my disarray. “Yes,” he says flatly, his voice void of any apology.

I stop tugging at the chains for a moment, my breath catching in my throat. I can’t believe it. They drugged me.

Maxwell lets out a soft laugh, the sound unsettling in the silence. “You’re in our world now, Starling,” he says, and I hate how my stomach clenches at the sound of that name. “You don’t get to run.”

The anger swells in me, sharp and hot. “Go to hell,” I snap. “You think this is over? You’re all a bunch of sick, twisted fucks. I’ll never stop fighting.”

Maxwell chuckles softly, then pulls out something from the leather pouch at his waist. It’s a small case holding several knives. He dangles it in front of me like a toy, letting the blades clink together as they settle in the case.

“Thought we could have a little fun since you’re here, tied up and all.” Maxwell’s smile deepens. “Let’s make this interesting.”

I watch in horror as he pulls one of the knives from the case. He steps closer, sending a ripple of dread through me. My chest tightens with fear as he gets closer, the knife hovering just inches from my skin.

“I want to play a game.”

I gasp as he presses the cool edge of the weapon against my chest, just enough to make my heart pound in my throat. My breath comes faster as I try to force myself to remain still.

“Behind you,” he continues, “there’s a nice, simple target. I’m going to throw these knives around you and try to hit it. If you stay still, you won’t get hurt. But if you move, well... that’s your problem, isn’t it?”

I can feel the blood drain from my face as his words sink in. My entire body tenses, the chains digging into my skin. I’m terrified of making a

move, even a twitch, in case I’m the one who ends up as the target.

Tears start to roll down my cheeks before I can stop them. I hadn’t meant for them to come, but the sheer terror of what he’s about to do makes my body betray me. I try to blink them away, but they keep coming, one after another.

Maxwell leans close and licks a drop from my cheek, the motion disturbingly intimate. I shudder violently in response, and his lips curl into a satisfied grin as he pulls the knife back.

I try to choke down my fear, but the helplessness is suffocating.

Then, I feel the sharpness of the blade as Maxwell drags it along the fabric of my dress. He pulls the knife down slowly, cutting the gown open right in the middle of my chest.

My breasts are now exposed to the cold air, and I flinch.

“Let’s see how still you can stay now,” Maxwell says with a chuckle as he pulls back, the knife still in his hand.

He steps back as he prepares to throw the first knife. His eyes gleam with a sadistic thrill, his fingers tightening around the handle.

“You ready?” he asks.

I can barely breathe as I force myself to stay as still as possible. The chains clink as I shift slightly, but I force myself to hold my position, knowing even the slightest movement could send one of those knives into me.

Everything goes quiet, and I hear nothing but the rapid beating of my heart in my ears, the soft rustle of Maxwell’s movements. Then, without warning, the first knife flies, cutting through the air with a whoosh.

It slams into the wall just behind me with a hard thud, sending a tremor through my body. I flinch, the sound like a gunshot to my ears, and I instinctively pull at the chains.

“That was close,” Maxwell remarks with a chuckle, eyeing me with amusement.

As he circles around me, Theodore and Julian’s eyes are on me. They’re studying me, enjoying every second of this fucked up game. I can feel their gazes like a physical presence, invasive, predatory, making my skin prickle.

There’s a darkness in their eyes, hungry and possessive, and it makes my insides twist. The way they watch me, their hands twitching, fingers flexing like they want to do more, makes my skin burn under their stare.

Maxwell chuckles, his attention bouncing between me and his brothers. I can feel them shift in their seats. They almost seem... uncomfortable, squirming, like they're trying to hold themselves back.

This is so fucked up.

I hate how it makes me feel, but I can't ignore it. It makes my heart pound faster. The mix of tension, fear, and the arousal crawling under my skin makes my head spin.

The knife slices through the air again, a blur of silver, and I barely manage to keep still. It grazes my arm, a near miss that makes me flinch.

Every time I feel a blade whizzing past me, my heart stutters.

Maxwell's voice cuts through my spiraling thoughts. "You're doing so well, Starling. Don't move, or I'll make it worse."

The laughter that bubbles up from his throat sends a chill through me. This is some sick, twisted display of power, and I'm nothing more than a target for their amusement. I feel the tears threatening to spill over again, but I bite my lip hard enough to taste blood.

Maxwell leans closer, so close, I can feel the heat of his breath against my cheek. His lips brush my ear as he whispers, "How long do you think you can last, Isabel? How long will it take before you beg for mercy?"

His eyes gleam with sadistic pleasure as he steps back, holding a knife loosely in his hand. I can see the muscles in his arm flex as he prepares to throw it.

He's not playing anymore—he's testing me.

Maxwell pauses for a long moment, as if he's savoring the tension, enjoying my fear. Then, he lets the weapon fly.

I don't even see it coming. I only feel the wind rush past me, the knife's passage slicing through the air beside my face. The blade strikes the target a few inches away from my ear.

My heart is hammering in my chest, my body on the edge of breaking down.

"Getting a little too close for comfort, huh?" Maxwell says, taunting me as the sweat collects on my skin.

I can barely hold my ground. I know I'm losing control, and I can't stop myself from shaking.

The words he has been planting in my head finally take root. The fear overwhelms me, and I feel something crack inside. "Please," I beg, my

voice small but desperate. “Please… stop. I can’t—please, I’ll do anything. Just stop.”

It’s utter desperation.

Maxwell’s gaze darkens, a twisted smile spreading across his face. “Anything?”

His fingers are suddenly on my skin, tracing the edge of my dress, pulling the fabric off my chest and ripping it apart.

The gown falls to the floor in pieces, and I’m left in nothing but my thong. The vulnerability stings like a slap, but I force myself to stay strong.

I can feel the brothers’ eyes on me, the way their gazes drag over me. The tension in the room grows tenfold.

Maxwell notices a dark spot on my panties. “Well, well, looks like someone’s a little... worked up.”

I can feel the heat rise in my cheeks. My body’s reaction disgusts me, but I know it’s not lost on them.

“Does she like this?” Maxwell asks, his eyes never leaving me as he turns to his brothers. “You two sure seem to like the view.”

He drops down to his knees in front of me and buries his nose between my legs, right at the apex of my thighs. My body jolts, and I swallow hard.

Maxwell takes a long sniff and hums in appreciation. “Fuck, Starling,” he growls, his face still pressed against me. His hands grab my ass cheeks, and his fingers dig into my skin, stirring something primal in me. I can’t deny it, no matter how much I want to.

He nips at my mound over the fabric, and the feeling sends a jolt of electricity through my body.

In one, swift movement, he rips my thong off, and I’m completely naked.

I gasp, the humiliation stifling, but I try to hold onto some sense of control, though it all crumbles once Maxwell leans in close again, and I feel the heat of his breath on my clit.

He sticks his tongue out, flat, and presses it to my throbbing center, and I shudder. My eyes reactively shut as I fall victim to the pleasure. *Oh, God*.

I’m in the most vulnerable position I’ve ever been in, yet I’ve somehow forgotten where I am when Maxwell lets his tongue circle my clit, sucking and nibbling after every turn.

He groans into my pussy when I let out a loud moan, mumbling words to himself I can barely hear. “So damn good. Such a perfect pussy. And all

fucking mine.”

His words send more pleasure coursing through my veins. “Oh, fuck, Maxwell,” I whimper.

When I open my eyes, Theodore and Julian are staring at me, their lips curving into dark smiles as they feed off my pleasure. My body responds to them, making me wetter, and Maxwell laps at my arousal like a man starved.

Julian approaches us, then his eyes tracing the outline of my exposed body. He kneels next to his brother and does the last thing I expect.

He joins Maxwell by putting his mouth right onto my entrance. Julian positions himself under me, allowing himself more space to dart his tongue in and out of my pussy while Maxwell continues to lap at my clit. The sensation is overwhelming, mind-blowing, and if I wasn’t still chained, I’d have fallen to the floor, knees weak.

When I look down, the view almost sends me into rapture.

Maxwell, sucking on my clit, and Julian, fucking me with his tongue.

“Oh my fucking God,” I wail, overcome with desire. I’m so fucking close, I can barely make a coherent thought.

Julian removes his tongue, and I immediately feel the void.

A few seconds later, Maxwell releases me too, and they exchange a look, something unspoken passing between them, like an electric current crackling in the air. For a moment, it’s as if the entire room disappears, and it’s just the two of them. Their eyes lock, neither of them saying a word.

Maxwell’s hand reaches up to cup Julian’s jaw, their faces mere inches apart. They’re so close, bodies touching.

Then, almost in slow motion, Maxwell leans in, his lips brushing against Julian.

Julian doesn’t pull away. Instead, he deepens the kiss, a deep hunger pulsing between them.

I can’t stop watching. I don’t want to. Their kiss, the way they come together—so fluid and natural—it’s almost too much. It’s not just the kiss itself, but the way it makes me feel. My chest tightens as I try to breathe, but the air feels thick.

I’m so fucking turned on.

After a few moments, they break apart, bringing their faces back to my center. At the same time, they put their mouths on my pussy.

Together, they lick my clit, their tongues tangling while bringing me closer and closer to the edge.

“Holy shit,” I mutter, unable to process what I’m feeling. I’ve never experienced anything as electrifying in my life.

A mixture of groans and moans fill the air, my orgasm building by the second.

Unable to focus on anything but Maxwell and Julian bringing me to my climax, I close my eyes, reveling in the sensation of having the two brothers on their knees for me. The tension, the power—it all arouses me.

I grit my teeth, my fingers curling against the chains binding me. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I chant, my orgasm begging to break free.

And I let it.

A scream rips from my throat when I come violently, my entire body convulsing as I let my inhibitions go. My body is consumed by them, the kiss, everything happening around me. It’s euphoric.

When I’ve finally come down from the high, a tear slips down my cheek, but it’s not from pain.

It’s from the sheer weight of everything I can’t control.

I hate them for doing this to me, for putting me in this position, but a small part of me is captivated.

And that terrifies me.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

Isabel is completely wrecked.

She’s hanging limp from the fixture, wrists and ankles still bound, her body slack with exhaustion. I know just beneath that trembling surface, her mind is still spinning, trying to make sense of what she’s become.

What we’ve made her.

I push off the chair, rolling my shoulders as I make my way to her. My brothers watch in silence, knowing better than to interrupt. I’ve let them have their fun, let them push her, break her down. This moment is mine.

I reach for her, my hands trailing over her damp, overheated skin. She shudders at the contact, a quiet whimper slipping past her lips. I smirk. Even now, with her body spent and her limbs weak, she’s still so damn responsive.

“Look at you, Siren,” I murmur, my fingers sliding up her sides, feeling the way she jolts under my touch. “Completely undone.”

Her head lolls forward, a few strands of hair sticking to the sheen of sweat on her face. I brush them away, tilting her chin up so she has no choice but to meet my gaze. Her pupils are blown wide, and there’s something hazy in her expression, like half awareness, half surrender.

I drag my thumb over her lower lip, pressing down just enough to make her gasp. “You feel it, don’t you?” I whisper. “The need to fight but the urge to give in. It’s intoxicating, isn’t it, Siren?”

She shivers but doesn’t answer.

I exhale sharply, my restraint hanging by a thread. Watching her was torture. Every gasp, every twitch, every desperate plea had set my blood on

fire. And now, she's right here, completely at my mercy.

I lean in, my breath hot against her ear. "My turn."

Her eyes widen, glinting with the instinct to argue. She's too drained, though, and when I reach up to unfasten her restraints, she doesn't fight me.

I catch her before she can slump forward, gathering her into my arms with ease. She's trembling, her body boneless against mine, her breath coming in shallow pants against my throat as her scent clings to me.

The room is quiet, save for the distant noises of the masquerade ball continuing downstairs. Laughter, music, the occasional burst of cheers—they're completely detached from what just happened here.

We exit the dark playroom, leaving Julian and Maxwell behind. This moment isn't for them.

I push through the adjoining door into a bedroom with a large bed in the center, the sheets crisp and untouched.

It won't stay that way for long.

Lowering Isabel onto the mattress, I watch as she sinks into it, her breath hitching when she feels the cool sheets against her fevered skin. She blinks up at me, disoriented, her limbs too weak to move.

I step back, dragging a hand through my hair as I take her in.

My mind reels with the sheer number of things I want to do to her.

The rise and fall of her chest is uneven, her lips still slightly parted, her thighs pressed together, as if she's trying to hold onto what's left of her sanity.

She won't have it for much longer.

"I'm going to take my time. Nice and slow. I'm going to finally make you mine."

Isabel's fingers twitch against the sheets. She's still in there somewhere, that defiant little spark buried beneath the exhaustion, waiting to ignite.

"See," I continue, slipping off my mask before shrugging out of my suit jacket, "Maxwell and Julian love to play with you like a toy—tease you, push you, make you come undone just for the thrill. They take pleasure in breaking you apart."

I unfasten the first button of my shirt, then another. Isabel watches me closely.

"The difference," I say, tilting my head as I step closer, "is that I don't just want to play with you, Isabel." I reach the last button and slip the shirt from my shoulders, letting it pool at my feet. "I want to own you. Every

part of you. Your body, your mind…" I trail my fingers along the edge of the bed, just barely brushing against her arm. "Your soul."

Isabel shudders, her mouth parting as if she wants to argue.

I smirk, reaching for her chin and tilting her face up to mine. "And the best part?" My thumb drags over the soft curve of her jaw. "You already know it's inevitable."

Her lips part just slightly beneath the weight of my touch. I can feel the battle waging inside her, see the last embers of resistance in those stormy eyes.

I brush my thumb over her lower lip, savoring the way her chest rises sharply beneath my touch. "Fighting is useless." I say in a near whisper, but the authority in my voice leaves no room for doubt. "We both know how this ends."

My fingers trace the sensitive skin where the marks from the restraints still linger.

A quiet chuckle rumbles in my chest as I trail my lips lower, down the slender column of her neck. I feel her pulse hammer beneath my mouth, fast and uneven.

My lips continue their path, grazing over her collarbone, down the delicate slope of her shoulder, each touch leaving a trail of heat in its wake. She's naked, stripped bare from when Maxwell tore her gown from her body, nothing left to hide her from me.

Her nipples are tight, her skin covered in goosebumps.

She's beautiful like this.

Not just in the way she looks, though that alone could drive a man to ruin, but in the way she feels. So small, fragile, yet filled with more fire than anyone I've ever met.

I slide my palm down her arm, tracing the faint lines of tension in her muscles before wrapping my fingers around her wrist.

Then, I close my mouth around her breast, drawing her into my mouth. Isabel jolts, a sharp gasp slipping free, followed by a moan. I could get drunk off the sound alone.

I take my time, rolling my tongue over the sensitive peak, teasing, tasting, savoring. Each flick earns me a new sound, each slow drag of my teeth makes her body arch closer, chasing the sensation even as she tries to resist it.

I move to the other breast, tending to it with the same attention.

When I feel she has had enough, when her breath is ragged, her body pliant, I press one last, lingering kiss to her skin before continuing my path lower.

Down the center of her stomach.

Across the dip of her navel.

“The way you react to me,” I murmur against her skin, “is fucking addictive.”

I drag my mouth lower, past the curve of her hip, my hands gripping her thighs as I spread them just a little wider.

Once I reach her mound, I take a deep inhale, soaking in her intoxicating scent. She smells like her orgasm from when Maxwell and Julian went down on her, and it’s making my cock hard.

I press my eager tongue to Isabel’s clit, and she trembles in response. Her arousal covers my mouth, and I revel in the sweetness of her pussy. “Fuck, Isabel. You taste so fucking good.”

She’s still sensitive and swollen from her last climax, so I take my time, moving slowly as I gently rub circles with the tip of my tongue, then gently press my index finger inside her.

Isabel’s back arches off the bed, and a soft whimper escapes her lips. With beckoning movements, I apply pressure on her most sensitive spot while lapping at her clit, savoring each taste.

I focus on every moan and movement as I draw Isabel closer.

“Yes, Theo, right there,” she whimpers when I suck on her clit, easing another finger into her pussy.

Her body is flailing on the bed, her breaths shallower and quicker, a clear sign she’s close.

I continue to feast on her, anticipation building in my core as I crave the chance to fully taste her, to watch as she unravels from my mouth alone.

My cock is painfully hard, and I’m itching to relieve the pressure. I unbuckle my belt and unzip my pants, careful not to break my rhythm with Isabel, eager to free myself.

I wrap my free hand around myself and tug on the length as I bring Isabel to orgasm. I can’t help but groan into her pussy, finally feeling some reprieve as I somewhat ease the growing pressure swelling inside me.

Isabel soon becomes frantic. “Fuck. Oh, God. I’m so close,” she whimpers.

I don’t stop until she comes all over my mouth, shaking like a leaf as her orgasm tears through her exhausted, drained body.

Her chest rises and falls, her eyes fighting to stay open, and a strange sense of contentment curls inside me. I want more of her. I want *all* of her. I’ve never felt this way before.

All the women I’ve been with don’t even come close to Isabel, to the way she consumes every part of me, as if I can’t get enough, no matter how much I take.

It also unsettles me. It’s dangerous. I can’t afford to get distracted when everything with Vanguard is at stake. I can’t let her get to me like this. But the way Isabel responds to me and makes me feel… I can’t see an ending to this story.

I shake those thoughts away and watch her.

“You don’t even realize how fucking breathtaking you are, do you?” I say, my thumb brushing the delicate bones of her hips. “Every time I look at you, I wonder how something so fierce could ever end up right here, with me.”

I lean down, my lips brushing against hers, barely a whisper of contact before I pull back just enough to see her eyes. The intensity in them mirrors my own.

There’s a rawness there, a vulnerability I didn’t expect, and it only makes me want her more.

I capture her mouth with mine, the kiss deep and slow, the intensity of it feeling like the world is collapsing around us. Her lips are soft, tasting like the remnants of a kiss I never want to end, but now, there’s an urgency to it. She presses into me, meeting my hunger with her own, as if we’re both trying to make sense of this maddening, undeniable pull between us.

Not wasting another moment, I shrug my trousers and briefs off and position myself above Isabel, angling my hard cock at her soaked entrance.

“I’m going to fuck you now, Isabel.” I don’t say anything more, almost needing something unspoken from her. I don’t want to make a further move until I can see it in her eyes.

I want her to choose me.

My fingers hover near her face, gently brushing a strand of hair from her cheek and tracing her skin.

Then, I see it: the softness in her gaze, a signal that she wants this as much as I do.

I grab onto my length and push into her, hard. Isabel lets out a yelp, followed by a loud moan, as I fill her with my cock.

“Fuck,” I groan, my eyes never leaving hers.

Pinning her arms above her head, I begin to pound into her relentlessly, as if I’ll never get the chance to do this again.

The sound of our bodies coming together echoes in the room, sending a shrill of pleasure down my spine. “Your pussy is soaked and so tight. Like. A. Fucking. Glove.” I grunt each word between thrusts as her walls tighten around me and she screams at the top of her lungs.

I release her wrists, and her hands immediately claw at my back, her nails digging into my skin.

“Is this what you wanted, Siren?” I pull out, letting the tip of my cock rub over her clit before I slam in again. “You wanted me to claim you, take what’s mine and leave you never the same again?”

Isabel parts her lips to respond, but I press my mouth on top of hers instead, silencing her as continue to fuck her into oblivion.

When I let go of the kiss, I add, “Just remember this, Isabel: no matter how many times I let my brothers play with you… You.” *Thrust*. “Belong.” *Thrust*. “To.” *Thrust*. “Me.”

I move in and out of Isabel at a steady, hard pace, drawing out the most delectable hums and mewls.

“Come for me, Siren. Then, I’m going to fill you up, over and over again, until your perfect cunt is full and leaking my seed,” I whisper in her ear.

Every time I look at Isabel, I feel a strange pull, like she’s a magnet to my soul. A primal part of me wants to breed her repeatedly, binding her to me time and again until she’s overflowing with my cum.

Isabel trembles beneath me, her body taut with anticipation.

Switching positions, I flip her over onto her knees, and she gasps as I penetrate her again from behind, rutting into her hard enough to draw her orgasm out.

“Oh my God,” Isabel moans. “Fuck, Theo. I’m coming.”

My cock pulses at her words, the anticipation slowly killing me. I can’t wait to fill her up.

Isabel’s walls clench around me, almost spasming as she reaches her climax.

Just when her pleasure starts to subside, I pick up the pace and release inside her, feeling the hot ropes jet out of my cock into her tight hole.

Isabel's body seems to pulse in time with every motion.

When we've both come down from our electrifying high, I smirk while catching my breath.

I turn Isabel around to face me and move closer, not wanting the space between us to linger too long, so I catch her lips with mine in a searing kiss.

"It's not over, Isabel," I murmur, and she turns her head slightly, eyes locking onto mine. There's something more in the way she looks at me now. I can feel her tension, the way her body still reacts to my touch, like it's also waiting for more, even if she won't admit it.

"Relax," I say softly. "We've got all night, and I'm going to make sure I take advantage of every second."

While the masquerade ball is still happening downstairs, the sound of music and laughter drifting faintly through the walls, I fuck Isabel.

I fuck her over and over again until she's a wilting flower and filled to the brim.

Until she's reduced to nothing but trembling limbs, and I have to carry her out, taking her home and tucking her into bed.

I slip in behind her, finally allowing myself to rest next to a woman who has not only caught my attention, but my heart.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

ISABEL

A dull ache lingers in my limbs as I stir awake, my body heavy, unwilling to move. My head feels clouded, thick with exhaustion and the remnants of whatever they drugged me with, making it difficult to pull the scattered pieces of last night back together. But I remember enough.

I'm in my bed.

No. Not my bed.

My lips press together as I force my eyes open, blinking against the morning light filtering through the curtains. The room is familiar, but it doesn't belong to me. It never has. The Whitmore estate isn't my home, no matter how many nights I've spent trapped within its walls, no matter how my body sinks into the mattress like it remembers the shape of me.

Still, the sheets are warm. The scent of Theodore lingers—on my skin, in the air, woven into the fabric around me. A shiver prickles down my spine. I barely remember him bringing me here, tucking me in, his body molding to mine as if it had always been meant to. But I do remember the way he looked at me: like I belonged to him.

My stomach twists. I shouldn't have let it happen.

Yet, when he told me I was his, when he touched me like he meant it, I broke.

I squeeze my eyes shut, swallowing against the shame creeping in.

A knock at the door pulls me from my spiraling thoughts. Before I can even process it, Julian's voice follows.

"You ready?"

I groan, yanking the covers over my head. My body protests the movement, aching in ways I don't want to acknowledge. "I'll be out in ten," I mutter into the pillow.

A soft chuckle drifts through the door.

His footsteps retreat, but I don't move right away. Instead, I burrow deeper beneath the blankets, inhaling Theodore's lingering scent from last night.

When I finally make my way downstairs and see Julian, the memories of him and Maxwell trickle in, on their knees before me, making out, their hands on my skin, their mouths on my body.

I swallow hard.

Julian glances up from where he's leaning against the counter, then silently hands me a steaming travel mug of coffee. In his other hand, he holds a muffin, golden brown and slightly misshapen.

I arch a brow as I take it. "Did you make this?"

"Yeah."

A slow smile tugs at my lips. "Thank you."

Julian doesn't respond, but the corner of his mouth twitches.

Before I can take a bite, a familiar chuckle cuts through the air.

"How'd you sleep?"

Maxwell appears out of nowhere, his eyes gleaming.

Heat creeps up my neck, and I force my expression into something neutral. "It was fine."

His smirk deepens, and I don't miss the way his gaze roves over me, reading between the lines.

Julian stays quiet, sipping his coffee, but his posture is stiff.

I break off a piece of the muffin, shoving it into my mouth just to keep myself from saying anything else.

Julian pushes off the counter, nodding toward the door. "Let's go."

Maxwell doesn't follow. Instead, he lingers. Then, as I pass, his lips curl into a smirk. "See you soon, Starling."

I ignore the way my stomach flips at the name and slip out the door, following Julian to his car.

The drive is silent.

I don't know if it's because Julian isn't in the mood to talk or if he can sense I'm still unraveling. Either way, I don't try to break it. Instead, I stare

out the window, gnawing on my nail, my nerves coiling tighter with every mile.

We finally pull into the underground garage. The moment we cross the threshold, we're swallowed by darkness.

Julian kills the engine, gets out, and starts walking. I follow, my heart hammering, my hands clammy. I have no idea what to expect today.

We step into an elevator, and Julian presses his finger on a scanner. The doors slide shut, and we ascend in silence.

When I step out, expecting the familiar lounge I've worked at for months now, I don't see the Vanguard I know.

The floors gleam under the recessed lighting. The walls are darker, the decor sleeker, richer. There's no music, no casual chatter from the patrons I've grown used to serving. Everything feels more exclusive.

"This isn't what you're used to, huh, Siren?"

I freeze.

Theodore steps forward, hands in his pockets, his deep gaze sinking into my bones. I feel him from the inside out.

I shift on my feet, unsteady because of last night and everything I shouldn't feel but do.

Theodore says, "Follow me," and all three of us head down a long hallway before stepping into an office.

A heavy wooden desk dominates the center, its surface cluttered with stacks of papers, open books, and a single glass of dark liquor left untouched.

Theodore gestures to the room as he strides inside. "This is the patriarch's office—my father's old digs." He moves toward the desk, resting a hand on a pile of documents. "But it's mine now."

He taps a finger against the papers, nodding toward the mess. "That's all the research I've been able to do since he died."

My feet carry me toward him, and I let my gaze drop to the neatly stacked pages peeking out from beneath the folders.

Cautiously, I reach for one, hesitating for a fraction of a second before glancing at the brothers. Theodore nods. Julian doesn't say anything, just watching me.

I flip it open.

The first thing I see is a series of articles from The Black Quill, each one dating back nearly twenty years. There are headlines about unexplained

disappearances, cryptic investigations, whispers of corruption buried between the lines of careful journalism. But then, further down, something catches my eye.

Sotelo.

My stomach tightens as I trace the ink with my fingertips, my pulse picking up speed.

Julian steps closer, peering over my shoulder. “What is it?”

“I recognize this name.”

I look up at them. A part of me hesitates to share this part of me, but if anyone would understand what it’s like to search for answers buried in shadows, it’s them.

“When I started looking for my parents, my research led me to the Sotelo family.” I shake my head, staring back down at the article. “I never knew my parents’ names, but when I started digging, I found ties to the Sotelo family. I just don’t know whether it’s through my mother’s side or my father’s.”

Maxwell exhales sharply. “Well, shit.” He appears out of nowhere, interrupting our conversation. “The Sotelo family was apparently wiped out decades ago. You think you’re connected to them?”

“I can’t be sure, but I have a lot of documents at my place that go into detail about the Sotelo family. There’s definitely a connection.”

The brothers exchange a look. Theodore leans back in his chair, which could easily be mistaken for a throne, his fingers steepled in front of him as he studies me. “We’ll go get them.”

I hesitate for just a second before nodding in agreement.

WE ARRIVE AT MY APARTMENT, AND THE BROTHERS FOLLOW ME INSIDE. IT’S clear they’re not particularly comfortable here—it’s small, not the kind of place people like them are used to, but they don’t complain.

As I step inside, a tinge of sadness hits me. It’s strange to be back. I haven’t been here in months, and the familiar sight of my little sanctuary feels almost foreign now. Things don’t feel the same. I’ve been away so long, and so much has changed. I miss it, though. I miss the freedom, the space to breathe. But most of all, I miss the life I had before all of this.

I push the feeling aside, focusing on the task at hand. I begin sifting through the boxes of files I've collected over the years, trying to find the documents about the Sotelo family.

The brothers work quietly, flipping through books and files, each of them engrossed in their own thoughts.

As I'm flipping through the papers, my eyes drift to them. Theodore is hunched over a pile of documents at my dining table, his sharp features softened in concentration. Maxwell is sitting on my small couch with his feet propped up on the coffee table, focused on a book. Julian is leaning against the wall in the living area, eyes scanning the room, like he's always watching for danger.

I can't help myself. I take a moment to just look at them. *Really* look. They're the reason I'm in this mess, and yet, they're also the ones who make my heart race in ways I can't explain.

Theodore suddenly looks up, catching me staring at him. A smirk curves at his lips as he leans back in his chair, his eyes never leaving mine. "Oh, Siren," he murmurs. "It's okay to like what you see."

Heat rises in my chest, and I quickly look down at the papers in front of me, my heart pounding in my ears. "I—I wasn't…" I trail off, feeling a little embarrassed.

Theodore chuckles darkly. "You don't have to be shy about it." He lets out a breath and leans back, running a hand through his blond hair. "We all know what you want."

Maxwell glances up, a smirk pulling at his lips. "You can't keep pretending like you're not enjoying this, Starling."

I shift uncomfortably, my fingers curling into the papers in front of me, trying to focus on anything other than the tension rising in the room.

It's impossible.

"I'm just here to find answers," I manage to say.

"And you will," Julian chimes in, pushing himself off the wall and striding over to where I'm sitting on the floor. He kneels, gently pinching my chin between his fingers and lifting my face to meet his gaze.

Every instinct in me screams to close my eyes, to break the intense connection, but I force myself to stay grounded.

His thumb brushes over my lips, and a shiver runs through me at the touch. Heat rushes through my body like it has been there all along.

“Eres tan hermosa,” he murmurs. “Como un ángel caído del cielo. Nosotros no merecemos algo así.”

(Like an angel fallen from the sky. We don’t deserve something like that.)

He slides his finger into my mouth, and I inhale sharply, the sudden intrusion making my pulse spike.

“Suck,” he commands.

I obey, my lips wrapping around his thumb as I swirl my tongue around it.

“I think about this perfect mouth wrapped around my cock all the time, mi corazón,” he whispers.

He removes his finger, a small trickle of saliva trailing down my chin. My legs close to relieve the pressure building in my core.

Theodore watches us from the side with a dark gleam in his eyes. I look up at him for a moment, and that’s enough for him to give me an order.

“Crawl to Maxwell, Siren.”

I shift onto my knees, the coldness of the floor biting at my skin, my body following the order without question. It’s not like I have a choice.

Maxwell’s eyes widen in anticipation, his legs spread wide. He’s sprawled back on the couch, every inch of him exuding *sex*. His chest rises and falls with each breath, his posture relaxed but with a predator’s focus.

Just as I reach him, his hand moves to his side, pulling a knife from his ankle. The sight makes my pulse quicken.

I sit back on my heels, waiting patiently for their next command. Julian shifts behind me, fingers brushing my hair as he moves it aside, his lips grazing my ear.

“Take his cock out,” he whispers, and my eyes lock onto Maxwell.

I reach for his belt, tugging it out from the loops, and then I pull his trousers and briefs down just enough to free his hardened length.

A silver ring dangles at the tip, catching the light, and I salivate at the sight before me. I had no idea Maxwell was pierced. I can’t tear my eyes away.

Maxwell chuckles. “I can’t wait for my piercing to make you feel good, Starling. Now, show me what your mouth can do.”

Slowly, I wrap my palm around his dick, and I angle my mouth just at the tip, flicking my tongue against the jewelry.

Maxwell’s head jerks back, and he groans, pushing his pelvis up so I take him deeper.

I choke when he reaches the edge of my throat, and I begin to bob my head up and down his shaft.

His fingers weave through my hair, gripping hard as he moves his hips in rhythm with my movements. “Fuck, sweetheart. Your mouth is a dangerous weapon,” he rumbles, his voice rough with the growing tension.

I close my eyes, enjoying the feeling of Maxwell’s cock swelling inside my mouth.

Suddenly, he pulls me off by tugging at my head, and before I can process it, his lips are on mine.

The kiss is hot and possessive.

His hands thread deeper into my hair, tugging me closer as his tongue demands entry, pushing me to open for him. I melt into the kiss, my body responding instinctively, as if it has always known him. His taste is intoxicating, and the way his lips move with mine feels like a storm brewing.

When he finally breaks the kiss, I’m left breathless, my chest rising and falling rapidly. Maxwell’s lips curve into a smirk as he pulls away just enough to speak.

“Lie down on the couch.”

I crawl onto the seat and settle into the plush cushions. The space feels charged as I wait, unsure of what’s coming next but knowing it will be just as consuming as everything else they’ve put me through.

In one, swift movement, Maxwell pulls off my pants and settles between my legs. He shoves the rest of his trousers down and places his cock right at my entrance.

Oh my God.

Theodore inches his way closer to us for a better view.

Julian follows, placing himself behind Maxwell. His gaze is molten with desire, and he pulls his dick out too, tugging on it a few times, his eyes not leaving mine for a second. I can feel the weight of his stare like a tangible thing, and it drives me wild.

Maxwell glances at me before turning his attention to his brothers, a slow grin spreading across his face. His eyes dart between the three of us, as if savoring the moment before things unfold.

Then, he slams into me, and I let out a yelp. “Fuck!”

Maxwell begins to laugh, almost maniacally, pulling in and out to help me adjust to his size.

The feeling of the cold metal of his barbell scratches my walls in the most delicious way, and my back arches when he buries himself to the hilt, spreading my legs wider for better access.

He grabs one of the cushions, carefully placing it beneath my back to adjust his angle. The shift in position sends a rush of heat through me, and suddenly, everything seems to blur. His next thrust finds that devastatingly perfect spot, and stars explode behind my eyes.

When I glance at Julian, still standing behind Maxwell, I see him squeezing something from a bottle onto his hard dick. He rubs his length a few times before he puts a hand on Maxwell's back, positioning himself at his behind.

A wave of heat floods through me as I watch them. It's as if every nerve in my body is on fire, waiting for what's next.

Julian spreads Maxwell's ass cheeks and inches his way in slowly, causing him to groan at the feeling, but Maxwell doesn't stop his movements inside me.

My heart pounds in my chest erratically, teetering on the edge of alarming.

I don't think I can handle this.

When Julian is pressed against Maxwell, fully in place, he starts to thrust in sync with Maxwell's strokes into my pussy. The pressure of the two men on top of me causes me to scream. "Ah! Yes, Max. Right there," I moan as he drills his cock into my G-spot.

A wave of pleasure builds within me, my breath quickening and growing shallow.

I watch Julian slide in and out of Maxwell, groaning and muttering, "So tight. I love fucking this ass." My body trembles, every muscle taut as I fight to hold on a little longer.

Maxwell releases a guttural sound, probably overcome with sensation as he gets pounded from behind while I milk his dick with my pussy.

He lowers his head, his breath brushing against my skin as he moves toward my neck. His lips barely graze at the sensitive spot before he sinks his teeth into the tender flesh.

His voice trembles as he whispers in my ear, "I'm so close. I'm going to make you mine, too, Starling… I'm going to fill you up completely."

His words are rough and possessive, and it’s the hottest thing I’ve ever heard.

My gaze drifts to Theodore, the echo of those same words hitting me with force. His jaw clenches, his fingers twitching at his sides, as if he’s holding himself back from intervening.

The tension crackles between us, but I don’t look away when I plead, “Make me yours, Maxwell.”

The pleasure coursing through my body is almost unbearable.

“Come for me, Starling,” he orders, and my restraint snaps.

The world tilts, and I lose myself in my orgasm, the rush of relief flooding me, leaving me breathless.

Maxwell’s body tenses above me, his climax taking hostage as he fills me with his cum, giving me a few last thrusts as he empties himself.

Julian, not letting up his movements behind Maxwell, lets out a throaty noise. “Fuck. I’m right there.”

But instead of releasing himself inside Maxwell, he pulls out.

I push myself up from the couch, but Theodore’s voice stops me. “Don’t you dare move, Siren.”

I tense, my body freezing at his command. Theodore’s gaze is searing into my skin, pinning me in place as he takes a step closer.

A strained sound snaps me out of my daze.

Julian, looking every bit the dangerous, God-like figure he is, has his head thrown back, one hand gripping his cock.

Maxwell, still clutching his knife like a prized possession, raises it to Julian’s leg, the blade grazing his skin with a sharp nick. A drop of blood beads at the cut and slowly trickles down his thigh.

Julian lets out a throaty noise, and a deep sound of satisfaction rumbles in Maxwell’s chest.

I watch them, my eyes wide, my mind a mix of shock and arousal.

Theodore chuckles, his gaze never leaving them. “Those two are in their own little world.”

After a few moments, Maxwell opens his mouth, sticking his tongue out to welcome Julian’s cum.

Julian’s entire body freezes as he releases into Maxwell’s mouth with a barely contained growl.

Mischief gleaming in his eyes, Maxwell spins around and splits my legs apart, bringing his lips down to my center.

Then, he lets the entire contents of his mouth spill out into my pussy. Using his fingers, he pushes the remnants inside, ensuring nothing goes to waste. I gasp.

I should be disgusted, maybe even concerned—but instead, a dark, twisted heat coils inside me, making me feel utterly deranged.

“I told you we’d mark you as ours in another way,” Maxwell says, his tone sounding almost delirious. “We’re going to fill you up until you overflow with our cum, my sweet Starling.”

Theodore looks like a volcano on the brink of eruption, his restraint hanging by a thread.

He looks at his brothers, his gaze dark and hungry. “I think it’s my turn to get a taste.”

Maxwell steps aside, his lips curled into a sly smile, and Theodore wastes no time. He grips my hips, flipping me effortlessly so my legs dangle off the couch. Then, he lowers himself to his knees, settling between my thighs.

In an instant, his mouth is on me, sucking on my sensitive nub. He laps his tongue around my clit, between my lips, inside my pussy. His gaze locks with mine as he devours me with insatiable need. The hunger in his eyes is almost palpable.

“Fuck, Isabel,” he grunts, pulling away for half a second before his mouth descends back on me, this time accompanied by two fingers pumping inside me.

I’m fully aware his brothers are standing there, silently observing Theodore lick and suck on their cum leaking out of my entrance.

Theodore’s tongue doesn’t stop its relentless attention, every second heightening the strange, confusing pleasure I feel. Another orgasm threatens to surface, and all I can focus on is the way Theodore’s mouth works on me.

“God, this feels so good,” I whimper, an electrifying rush racing up my spine.

Just when I’m at the edge of my climax, he stops, and I let out a whine.

“I can’t let my brothers be the only ones to fill you, Siren,” he taunts, unbuckling his pants with a quick flick. He frees his cock, and in one, smooth motion, enters me.

I’m so wet from the mix of my arousal and Maxwell and Julian’s cum, I’m able to adjust to his size within a few seconds. I moan loudly, letting the

pleasure consume me, my orgasm cresting like the feeling never left.

"I'm so close," I mutter, my senses overwhelmed.

"Not yet, baby," Theodore groans, fucking me with urgency, like he's desperate to get closer, push deeper.

This feels *too* good, though I try to remind myself none of this should be happening. But I feel like I'm being torn between two worlds, one where I'm in control and one where I've surrendered to them.

That's not a problem I can focus on now, not when I can't even make sense of what's happening inside me.

"Now," Theodore growls, urging me to release all control.

I let the pleasure consume me, surrendering to the waves of heat crashing over my body. Each pulse sends a jolt through me until my thoughts blur.

Theodore mumbles incoherently as he releases inside me, filling me up in ways I never thought possible.

When my body releases the tension, my muscles ache with the need for more, and I can't help but crave it. Crave *them*.

I realize, in that moment, that the brothers have me trapped, caught in a grip I don't think I can escape from now. I don't know if I even want to any longer.

They've wormed their way into my thoughts, their touch branded into my skin, and somewhere along the way, they've found their way into my heart.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

A few days have passed since we visited Isabel's apartment.

There's a shift in the air, a subtle one.

I notice it every time I look at Isabel. She still fights us, bickers and snaps at us like she always does, but there's something different now. She's almost… comfortable.

She has been coming out of her room more often, lingering in the living room while I go through paperwork, Julian pours over his sketches, and Maxwell… Well, Maxwell does Maxwell shit, whatever that entails.

Isabel doesn't say much. She just stays, hovering like a ghost, not quite involved, but never really leaving. I can feel her eyes on me as I work, even when she's pretending to be absorbed in whatever files she's skimming through. I've caught her more than once looking at me from across the room, her face a mix of curiosity and wariness. It's like she's trying to make sense of us, of all this.

Yesterday, when I was knee-deep in paperwork, Julian noticed her in the kitchen. The look on his face was priceless. He practically ran to her, ready to check if she was burning up with fever. Turns out, she was just hungry and decided to make herself something to eat.

That was a first.

Not only did she cook for herself, but she made enough to feed all four of us.

It wasn't just a meal; it was an offering.

A silent peace offering, one I didn't miss.

It feels like a subtle dance, this back-and-forth we've found ourselves in. She keeps her distance, but she no longer complains that she's still here, caged like a bird with clipped wings.

Every day, a little more of her breaks through her walls, and I can't help but wonder if she even notices it.

Right now, she's lying on the couch, stretched out on her stomach, her elbows propped up as she sifts through more files.

I'm sitting across from her, going through some old tomes Julian brought back from the archives, my mind half on the words in front of me, half on her. She doesn't know it, but I'm watching her again, the way she flips through the papers with such focus. She's so beautiful when she's absorbed in something. Her hair falls in waves, dark and messy, spilling across her back as she bends over the files. The curves of her body shift with every movement as her shirt pulls tight over her skin. I can't help but admire everything about her. It's like she carved herself a place in my mind, something I can't shake even if I wanted to.

Is this love?

The thought drifts in like a whisper on the wind, soft yet impossible to ignore. I've never known love before—never dared to reach for something so vast and consuming—but if this isn't love, then what else could make her feel like a melody woven into my very being?

Six months.

That's how long she's been here, and in that time, she has seeped into our lives like ink staining paper.

Permanent, inescapable.

Isabel is no longer just our captive. She's part of us now, entwined in ways I don't think any of us expected.

Julian does everything to make her comfortable, even though he doesn't have to. He remembers the little things: her favorite foods, the snacks she likes, the way she takes her coffee. He's always drawing her, filling page after page with sketches of her face.

Maxwell looks at Isabel like she's some impossible illusion he's afraid will vanish if he glances away for even a second. She's his greatest act, his most dangerous gamble, and he takes any excuse to slip into her room at night.

If we were ever meant to let her go, that time has long since passed.

I take a deep breath, leaning back in my chair and allowing myself a moment to just look at her. My chest tightens, and I feel that familiar burn of wanting her, of needing to possess the space she occupies. But for now, I settle for this—admiring her from a distance, savoring the way she has become such a fixture in my life.

She has always been a puzzle, but lately, I feel like she's slowly revealing herself to me, bit by bit.

I glance over at her, tilting my head as I study her. "Found anything interesting?" I ask.

She doesn't immediately respond. Instead, she flips another page, her eyes scanning the documents. She doesn't look up at me, but I see the way her lips tighten slightly.

"It's all connected," she says after a beat. "Vanguard, the Sotelo family… It's all tangled up in a way I can't quite piece together yet, but I will."

I can't stop the smirk that pulls at my lips. "Good. You're getting closer."

Isabel suddenly shoots up from the couch. Her eyes are wide, her pulse practically visible in her neck. "Oh my God," she breathes, the excitement in her voice unmistakable. "This is it. This is it!"

She rushes to the dining room table, her hands flying through the scattered books and papers. The sound of pages turning frantically fills the silence.

Julian's heavy footsteps thud down the stairs, and within seconds, he's standing in the doorway. "What's going on?"

Isabel holds up a finger, silencing him as she digs through the mess with newfound determination.

After a moment, she pulls something from the pile and looks at me, her gaze locked on mine as she holds the paper between us. "You said the Whitmores and the Addingtons were the main founders of Ebonridge, right?"

I nod. "Yeah. Their legacy is tied to everything here."

Julian watches the exchange closely, but he stays quiet, letting Isabel continue her line of questioning.

Isabel pulls another sheet of paper from the pile, her fingers trembling slightly as she holds it up. Her eyes lock onto mine with an intensity that matches the surge of unease creeping up my spine.

“Okay. From what I was able to find, you were left at the orphanage, yet you were supposedly dead. Why would they want you to *stay* dead when you weren’t really?”

My mind races, searching for an answer I still can’t find. I shake my head slightly, my jaw tight. “That’s what I want to know too, but I can’t figure it out.”

Isabel doesn’t look up from the papers as she continues, her voice taking on a darker tone. “In one of the files I had, it mentions the Addingtons as having a close connection to the Sotelo family, which was their link to the Whitmores. But once the Addingtons and Whitmores joined forces, the Sotelos seemed to disappear.”

She pauses, glancing up at me before continuing, her voice a little more strained. “From what I was able to figure out, it seems like most of the Sotelo family—or what was left of it—was women…”

Julian’s face shifts as he processes the information. “Oh, shit. Do you think they sacrificed them in the rituals to gain more power, which is why they simply vanished?”

The thought hangs in the air like a suffocating cloud, the pieces of this twisted puzzle falling into place.

I glance at Isabel, her face pale but determined as she looks back at me. “If that’s true,” I say quietly, “then the Sotelos weren’t just erased from history—they were *sacrificed* to start maintain the legacy.”

Isabel turns to Julian. “Julian, give me the book with all the ancestry of Ebonridge.”

He moves toward the bookshelf, pulling out the thick, leather-bound book and handing it to Isabel. She flips it open and quickly skims the pages. Her eyes move faster with each turn until she stops abruptly, her fingers freezing.

“What the fuck?” she mutters under her breath.

I look over her shoulder, my stomach sinking. “What’s wrong?”

Isabel’s face goes pale, her finger pointing to the page she just turned. “The ‘S’ last name page is *missing*.”

I step closer, leaning over her shoulder to get a better look. The absence of the page is jarring—there’s a clean gap where the page should be, as if someone deliberately ripped it out.

Julian’s brow furrows, his lips pressing into a thin line. “What the hell does that mean?”

Isabel's eyes are hard now. "It means someone is trying to hide something."

Julian's eyes suddenly widen, his hand pausing mid-air, as if something has just clicked into place. "Wait," he mutters, as though he just remembered something important. He looks over at Isabel and then back at the bookshelf. "Maybe the missing pages are in Father's boxes."

He moves quickly, heading to the office. We follow him.

When we step inside, I run my fingers along the boxes we brought over from Lionel's office at Vanguard, scanning each one. Finally, I stop at one at the back.

"Check this one," I say.

Isabel flips open the box, the musty scent of old paper filling the air. Her fingers shake slightly as she flips through the papers, her eyes scanning the names. The Sotelo family tree stretches across the yellowed parchment. She mutters to herself as she traces the lineage, the words falling quietly from her lips.

Her eyes widen as she stares at one particular name.

"Isn't this your adoptive mother?" Her voice is tight with disbelief as she looks up at me and Julian.

My heart lurches in my chest as I look at the photo and name she's pointing to—*Celeste Sotelo.*

I swallow hard, trying to steady myself, but it's like everything I thought I knew is unraveling before my eyes. I look at the page again, my eyes scanning the name, trying to piece together something that doesn't make sense.

Julian's voice cuts through the tension in the room. "It's time we pay Mother a visit."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

I cradle the glass of whiskey in my hand, the amber liquid catching the light as I swirl it slowly. The burn from the first sip lingers on my tongue, a welcome heat settling in my chest.

I pick up my phone, staring at the screen for a moment. The contact is waiting for me to hit dial. I press the call button, waiting as the phone rings in my ear.

My finger drifts to the edge of the glass, tapping it absently as I wait. It has been a long road to get here, and now, it's all in motion—product hitting the shelves, business moving at a pace I hadn't expected. Ebonridge's borders are just the beginning—we're already pushing beyond.

I take another sip of my Iron Veil whiskey as the phone continues to ring.

With every passing moment, the whispers of the past are beginning to clear. The truth is getting closer, and it feels like the end of it all is finally within reach.

The power, the control—it's all falling into place.

It will soon all be mine.

Isabel's articles she wrote exposing Vanguard and its elites have been making waves.

The paper is printing stories of corruption, fraud, and hidden agendas. The names of the men involved are surfacing, their pristine reputations unraveling in real time.

Carlton Pierce, the so-called philanthropist, is under investigation for embezzling millions from the charities he swore by. Samuel Hawke, the

former senator, is being scrutinized for his connections to a series of shady business deals that stretch all the way to Europe. And Marcus Ellison? A scandalous affair with a minor that's about to destroy his political career.

It's all coming out. The once untouchable men of Ebonridge, with their wealth, influence, and power, are finally being dragged into the light. And Isabel's articles are at the forefront of it all.

The phone continues to ring, the sound growing almost rhythmic as I sit back, staring ahead. I've been waiting for this moment for years, and now that it's here, I'm not about to waste it.

As the line rings a fourth time, I feel the weight of the decision I've made, but it doesn't faze me. The world doesn't wait for anyone, and neither will I. This is what I've worked for.

Once Vanguard implodes from the inside out, we'll rebuild. We'll take everything that's left and make it ours, an empire forged from the wreckage of what Vanguard was, from the ashes of their power.

And this time? No one will stand in our way.

Finally, the line clicks, followed by a voice on the other end.

"It's about time," they say, almost amused.

I lean back in my chair, swirling the whiskey in my glass. She knows exactly why I'm calling, and I'm sure she has been waiting for this as much as I have.

I take a moment before responding. "Hello, Camila."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

ISABEL

I wake up with a gasp, my body jerking upright as cold sweat clings to my skin. My breath is uneven, my pulse hammering against my ribs. I don't remember the dream—only the weight of darkness pressing against my chest, the suffocating feeling of fear wrapping around me. It lingers in my bones, in the way my fingers curl into the sheets, grasping at nothing.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to shake off the unease, but it clings to me, refusing to let go.

I don't want to be alone.

The thought comes before I can stop it, curling inside me like a whisper of weakness.

I hate that I need anything from them, but right now, I do.

I push the blankets off and slip out of bed, my bare feet touching the cold floor as I move toward the door. The wooden floorboards creak softly beneath my weight, and I hesitate.

Fuck. What should I do?

I ease the door open and step into the hallway. My eyes flick to the three doors at the end of the hall. I hesitate again.

I could go to Theodore, but I know what would happen if I did. He wouldn't turn me away, but the intensity in his eyes, the way he looks at me like he wants to consume me whole—it would be too much right now.

Maxwell? No. I don't trust myself with him, not when he gets under my skin so easily, not when he knows exactly how to push me to the edge and make me fall.

That only leaves Julian.

The kindest of the three, who, despite everything, has always been the gentlest with me. The safest.

My decision made, I move toward his door, my steps light as I turn the knob and push it open just enough to slip inside.

The room is dark, the only light coming from the faint glow of the moon filtering through the windows. At first, I don't see anything but the outline of the bed. Then, my eyes adjust, and I freeze.

Two figures lie curled together in the center of the mattress, still and peaceful.

Maxwell is facing me, and Julian is behind him, one arm draped around his waist, his face relaxed in sleep.

My heart swells.

I've never seen them like this—unguarded, unburdened by the weight they carry when they're awake. Julian's brow isn't creased in thought, Maxwell isn't smirking or teasing. They're just… them.

A warmth spreads through my chest.

I should turn around and go back to my room. Instead, I take a careful step forward, my heart in my throat as I inch closer. I don't want to wake them or to break this moment.

Carefully, I lift the edge of the blanket.

I gasp.

Julian's body is molded perfectly to Maxwell's back, his face buried against Maxwell's shoulder, his breathing slow. Their legs are tangled beneath the blankets, Julian's foot hooked around Maxwell's ankle, keeping him close even in sleep.

They're both naked, and when I look closer, I notice Julian's cock buried deep inside Maxwell as they cuddle.

Oh my God.

The longer I stand there, the harder it is to ignore the way my breath quickens, my lungs working overtime as something dark and visceral stirs inside me.

My pulse throbs.

They look good like this. *Too* good.

I swallow, but my throat is dry.

The way they're wrapped around each other sends a sharp pulse of arousal straight through me. My fingers tremble against the fabric of my sleep shirt, my thighs pressing together instinctively.

Shit.

I suck in a breath.

The image of them like this is burned into my brain now, impossible to erase.

Slowly, I slip beneath the blanket, easing myself in front of Maxwell. The bed shifts slightly beneath my weight, and for a second, I hold my breath.

Neither of them stir.

A quiet exhale leaves me as I settle in, pressing my body against Maxwell's warmth. He's solid, his scent wrapping around me. His body heat sinks into mine, and before I can stop myself, I press my forehead against his chest.

Julian shifts behind him, his hold tightening just slightly, pulling Maxwell in closer, as if, even in sleep, he doesn't want to let go.

Maxwell finally stirs.

A twitch of his fingers, an exhale against my hair. Then, his body tenses slightly, his breathing changing. I know the exact moment he wakes up, even before his eyes open.

His body stills, like he's taking in the situation, registering the extra warmth pressed against his front.

My pulse jumps. I hadn't thought this through, hadn't considered what would happen when one of them woke up to find me here.

I brace myself, expecting some sort of remark, maybe even annoyance that I interrupted their moment. Instead, he lets out a slow, sleepy hum, his arm tightening around my waist, pulling me even closer.

Heat blooms across my skin.

I don't move, barely even breathe as his fingers splay against the small of my back, pressing me flush against him. There's no hesitation, no sign of him questioning why I'm here.

A drowsy sigh escapes him before I feel a gentle kiss pressed to my forehead.

Something in my chest clenches so tight, it almost hurts.

I don't know what to do with the way that simple act makes me feel, how easily it threatens to unravel me.

I exhale, letting the tension seep out of me, and snuggle in closer.

That's when I feel his unmistakably hard cock against my stomach.

My lips part slightly as my entire body goes rigid for half a second before my thighs clench in response.

Maxwell shifts, and I swear I feel him smirk against my hair. His arm tightens around me, fingers grazing over my spine in a slow, idle pattern.

The way he touches me is unhurried, as if he has all the time in the world to explore. His palm drifts from my lower back, down the curve of my hip, then back up again, settling in the dip of my waist.

His other hand finds my hair, his fingers weaving through the strands, gathering them lazily before twisting a few locks between his fingers. He gives a slight tug, and my face jerks up.

I suck in a breath.

He hums at the sound.

Our lips are now mere inches apart.

He slides his hand lower, grabbing my ass then subtly grazes his fingers over my exposed heat. I never wear underwear to sleep, and for this, I'm suddenly thankful.

I don't know who moves first. Maybe it's him. Maybe it's me. But before I can think better of it, our mouths meet.

The kiss is slow, unhurried, just like his touch. His lips move against mine lazily, teasing, coaxing. He nips at my bottom lip, sucking it into his mouth before soothing the bite with his tongue.

Heat curls in my stomach, sharp and dizzying.

Maxwell smiles, dragging his thumb across my swollen lips like he's memorizing the feel of them. "Could get used to this," he murmurs.

His other hand—still lingering between my legs—slinks its way between my lower lips, touching my clit in a soft stroke. I let out a sharp exhale.

When Maxwell sets his fingers at my entrance, I feel a tingle shoot down my spine.

Slowly, he eases them inside, and I immediately tighten around him, a throaty moan spilling from my mouth.

This isn't what I expected when I crept into Julian's room. Whatever haunted me in my nightmares is nothing but a distant memory now.

I move in sync with his fingers, matching the slow pace.

Julian is still asleep, blissfully unaware of what's happening just inches away, and the thought of him waking up to this excites me.

I kiss Maxwell again, and a low sound rumbles from his chest. He deepens our kiss, tilting his head, pressing me closer. His free hand tangles in my hair, his body flush against mine, and I feel *everything*.

Julian lets out a gravelly hum from his throat as he wakes. His body shifts behind Maxwell, his fingers flexing in the blanket before reaching out blindly.

When his hand finds me, his touch is warm, trailing along my waist.

He's still half asleep, but it's as if his body remembers exactly where he is, exactly what he was doing before he drifted off. He exhales against Maxwell's shoulder as he shifts, rolling his hips forward in a slow thrust.

Maxwell jolts slightly, a gasp cutting through his lips, but he doesn't stop kissing me. If anything, the kiss grows more desperate.

A shudder wracks through him as Julian moves again.

I feel every tremor of pleasure ripple through Maxwell, his body tensing, his grip tightening on my waist like he needs something to ground him.

I moan softly into Maxwell's mouth, needing more. His fingers are still expertly working inside me, curling, stroking, coaxing me closer to the edge.

A tidal wave threatens to pull me under, and I can do nothing but surrender to it.

Maxwell lets out a choked sound against my lips, his body trembling against mine as Julian moves.

I can't stop the memory flashing in my mind: Julian and Maxwell together, their bodies slick with sweat, their movements raw and desperate as they fuck on top of me. The thought has been a slow-burning ember in my chest since it happened.

Now, I'm right here with them, tangled in the heat of it, drowning in them.

And I'm so close.

My hands seeks Maxwell out, needing to feel him, to return the intensity he's pouring into me. My fingers brush over his stomach, feeling the way his muscles clench under my touch. I grab onto his hard cock, fingers curling around him as I stroke him. My touch slows just enough for my fingers to toy with the piercing at his tip.

Maxwell lets out a strangled sound against my lips, his forehead dropping to mine. "Fuck, Starling," he rasps, voice rough with pleasure.

“That mouth, those hands. That pussy. You’re fucking soaked.”

Julian’s lips graze the back of Maxwell’s neck. “Look at her. I bet she’s been dreaming about us.”

Maxwell chuckles darkly, his grip tightening at my waist as he rocks into my hand. “Bet she has,” he agrees, voice wrecked. “Bet she thinks about us filling her up, taking her any way we want. You like that, don’t you, Starling? You want to be passed between us, made to take whatever we give you?”

A choked moan escapes my lips, and Julian groans at the sound.

“Is that what you want, corazón?” Julian hums, his fingers brushing against my chin, tilting my face so he can see me fully. His eyes are hooded, heavy with lust, and I can feel the way he drinks in every inch of me. “You want to be taken and claimed, don’t you? Does it make you wet knowing we won’t stop until we’ve ruined you completely?”

Julian leans over Maxwell and captures my lips in a kiss that’s all heat and possession, like he’s been waiting for the chance to taste me. His tongue teases mine, coaxing a breathy moan from deep in my throat.

When he finally pulls back, a needy whimper escapes me, my grip on Maxwell tightening involuntarily. He groans.

The coil inside me clenches, and I know I won’t last much longer.

“Jueputa... eres perfecta, mi amor,” Julian mutters.

Maxwell’s fingers keep working me relentlessly, knowing exactly how to keep me there, to hold me in that unbearable place between pleasure and ruin. Julian watches me, his gaze like a fire licking over my skin, burning me alive.

“That’s it, Starling,” Maxwell murmurs against my lips. “Come for me. Show us how much of a desperate slut you are when you break.”

I cry out, my entire body tensing before I shatter. The pleasure crashes over me in waves, stealing my breath, my thoughts—everything.

My back arches, my nails digging into Maxwell’s skin as I cling to him, gasping his name.

Maxwell groans against my throat, his lips hot as he trails kisses over my skin, murmuring praises I can barely hear over the rush in my ears. My body pulses, still caught in the aftershocks.

But I don’t let go of my grip on his cock.

“Fuck,” Maxwell groans, his hips jerking instinctively into my touch. “You’re gonna make me lose it.”

Julian’s movements behind him grow more erratic, his pace no longer controlled, instead driven by pure, unrelenting need. His fingers dig into Maxwell’s hips, holding him in place as he buries himself deep.

Maxwell lets out a strangled sound, his head tipping back, exposing the length of his throat. His breath hitches as Julian thrusts harder, faster.

“That’s it,” Julian grits out to Maxwell. “Take it. Just like that. My. Good. Fucking. Boy.”

Oh, fuck.

Seeing them like this has my breath coming in short pants.

Maxwell is barely holding on, his body caught between Julian’s frantic rhythm and the relentless strokes of my hand. He looks at me, his eyes wild, mouth parted, as though he wants to say something but can’t find the words.

“Come for me, baby,” I whisper, stroking him with purpose now, watching him fall apart.

A desperate cry rips from his throat, his entire body shuddering as pleasure overtakes him. His hands claw at the sheets, his breath breaking apart into uneven gasps as he spills into my hand, his release warm against my skin.

The sight of him unraveling completely—so raw, so beautifully undone—sends Julian over the edge with him. A guttural moan tears from Julian’s lips as he thrusts deep one last time, his whole body seizing as he spills inside Maxwell. His forehead presses against Maxwell’s shoulder, his breath hot and uneven against his skin.

For a long moment, all I can hear is the sound of our breathing, all tangled together.

Maxwell collapses against me, his body boneless as he catches his breath. Julian leans into him from behind, pressing a lingering kiss to the back of his neck.

Then, Julian exhales deeply, running a hand through his hair before leaning over to grab some towels from his nightstand. He hands one to me first, his fingers brushing mine in a way that feels almost reverent, and then he passes another to Maxwell, who groans in exhaustion but takes it, nonetheless.

We clean up in comfortable silence. The frantic energy of before has simmered into something more tender.

Once we’re done, Julian tosses his towel aside and stretches before slipping back under the covers. Maxwell does the same, his body boneless

as he drapes an arm over me, pulling me against his chest like it’s second nature.

This time, when the three of us settle, it isn’t just about need. It’s restful.

Maxwell’s breathing evens out first, his fingers still lazily tracing patterns on my skin even as sleep claims him. Julian follows soon after, the rise and fall of his chest against Maxwell’s back lulling me into something dangerously close to peace.

I should go back to my own room, put space between us before I sink any deeper into this.

But I don’t.

I’m slowly coming apart.

Each of them has claimed a different part of me, carved their names into my soul in ways I never saw coming. Theodore, with his intensity, the sharp edges that cut, and the unwavering strength that holds me steady. Julian, with his warmth, his gentle hands, the way he sees me even when I try to make myself invisible. And Maxwell—wild, reckless, a storm I never wanted to be caught in, yet here I am, willingly drowning.

I told myself I would fight them, that I would never give in. But what started as resistance has turned into something else entirely.

The truth is, I don’t know who I am without them anymore.

As I let my eyes slip shut, I make a silent oath.

I am theirs. Always.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

MAXWELL

A little boy, barely five, stands at the iron gates of the St. Dismas Home for Boys, his chubby hands clutching the sleeves of a too-big coat. His parents are arguing just outside the entrance, their voices muffled.

"He doesn't talk to anyone. He talks to himself. He plays with knives, Rhonda. He smiles when he cuts things. He's... not right," the father argues.

The woman—the mother—kneels in front of the boy. Her eyes are puffy and red. But she doesn't touch him. Doesn't kiss his forehead or press a trembling hand to his cheek like other mothers usually do.

The footsteps of someone approaching echo off the cold stone path.

"Mr. and Mrs. Callahan?"

A tall man in a long black cassock steps forward, his salt-and-pepper beard neat, his expression gentle. He doesn't smile, not exactly, but his voice is calm.

"I'm Father Calloway. I help oversee the home."

The parents shift uncomfortably, as if the mere idea of this place is pressing on their skin.

"We'll take care of him," Father Calloway says, his eyes settling on the boy—not judging, just watching. "We believe every child deserves a safe place to land, even the ones who don't quite fit the mold."

The mother hesitates. For a moment, she looks like she might say something. Eventually, she does.

"We tried," she says to no one in particular. Maybe to herself. Maybe to God. "He's just… too much."

His father won't even look at him.

And the boy just stands there. Silent. Watching.

His mother gives him his favorite doll, and they leave without a goodbye. The gates close behind them, and the home swallows the little boy whole.

He doesn't cry or scream. He walks through the halls with his hands in his pockets, his head tilted to the side, like he's listening for something no one else can hear.

When he's in the confines of his new room, he gives the doll a name—Vico. He tells Vico everything. About how he loves the feeling of cold metal in his hands. How he doesn't understand why people are so afraid of blood.

The other boys steer clear of him. They say he's strange.

Too weird.

Too quiet.

Too dangerous.

And the truth is, he liked it that way.

Because eventually, he realized something.

Monsters weren't the things hiding under beds.

They were the ones who left you there.

I SIT ALONE IN MY OFFICE AT MADHOUSE. THE MUSIC IS MUTED HERE, drowned out beneath layers of concrete, but I can still feel the beat in my bones.

In one hand, I twirl a knife balanced perfectly between my fingers. In the other, I hold Vico.

The doll is weathered now, the once-bright colors of its painted face faded into muted tones. One of its eyes is chipped, the stuffing around its neck frayed, barely holding it together. Still, I keep him close. I always have.

I should've thrown it out years ago. Should've burned it, buried it, or left it behind at St. Dismas like everything else.

But I didn't.

Because Vico is the only piece of my past I ever chose to keep, even if that past tastes like ash in my mouth.

I stare down at the crooked smile painted on his face. Vico doesn't judge; he never has. He was there when I didn't speak. When the other kids flinched away. When the fathers whispered behind my back and crossed themselves after catching me carving patterns into the wooden bedposts. He was there when I bled… and when I liked it.

And he was there when my parents left me.

My jaw clenches. The knife stills in my hand.

The mention of them sends something black curling up my spine.

I don't just resent them. I don't just hate them.

I *loathe* them.

For making me feel like I had to be fixed, like I was some kind of defect they didn't know how to manage.

I rotate in my chair slowly, letting the tension snake through my muscles. My eyes land on the portrait on the wall, a dusty, framed photo I dug up years ago in the town archive like a grave robber searching for bones.

My parents, smiling stiffly in front of a pristine white house, dressed like people who thought appearance was the only thing worth saving.

They died in that house, burned alive in a fire that gutted every inch of their carefully curated world.

The irony still tastes sweet on my tongue. How poetic it was, the flames devouring the perfect life they tried so hard to protect, as if the universe finally agreed they'd built something worth destroying.

My siblings too—they were wiped out in the blaze like they never existed. A whole family reduced to ash and smoke.

And yet, I remain.

Their mistake. Their shame. The son they threw away, still breathing.

I raise the knife and throw it.

The blade spins once—twice—before burying itself deep into the canvas with a soft, satisfying thud.

Right between my mother's eyes.

The knife still quivers where it landed, humming with the same quiet fury that has been lodged in my chest since I was a kid. I stare at it for another second, then look down at Vico.

"Always a good shot," I mutter as I brush a thumb over the doll's cracked cheek before gently placing him back in the top drawer of my desk,

laying him carefully as if he were still fragile, still something to be protected.

My fingers find the hilt of another knife almost instinctively, and without thinking, I begin the rhythm: blade to desk, blade to desk, sliding it expertly between the spread of my fingers.

The hum of it keeps me grounded.

The orphanage comes back in fragments. The early years were the worst. I hated everyone and everything.

Until Julian and Theodore. In no time, they were the most important people in my world. My family, my only constants in a place that never felt safe.

But it was different with Julian.

Julian was my first everything. My first love. My most lasting one. What I felt for him went deeper than blood, deeper than friendship.

And now, there's Isabel.

I slow the knife down until it's still, the tip resting between two fingers, my hand steady.

She should've been nothing but a pawn, a complication in our carefully laid plans.

But last night…

When she walked into Julian's room and saw us together, there wasn't judgment in her eyes. There wasn't fear. There was heat, curiosity, *hunger*.

The moment still lingers on my skin. Her mouth, her hands, the way she gasped my name like it belonged to her. The way Julian touched her while looking at me, as if we were sharing something sacred.

It wasn't supposed to feel like that, and yet, it did.

A knock at the door pulls me out of my thoughts. I don't move right away; I just drag the tip of the knife back across the wood once before calling out, "Come in."

The door creaks open, and Julian steps inside.

He's always so damn composed—shoulders squared, chin up, that quiet power he wears like a tailored suit. Not macho, exactly. No, he's too refined for that. It's more like a soldier who knows he doesn't need to raise his voice to command a room.

I smirk. "You practicing your brooding face for the mirror again, or is this a special visit?"

Julian closes the door behind him without a word, his eyes flicking to the knife in my hand before he crosses the room and heads for the small bar cart in the corner. He doesn't bother asking; he just pours himself a glass of Theodore's newest whiskey.

He takes a sip, eyes on me the whole time. There's something in his stare tonight, a glint of heat that tells me he didn't come here just to shoot the shit.

I lean back in my chair, folding my arms behind my head and kicking my boots up onto the desk, a grin tugging at my lips. "You want something, Juju, or are you just here to watch me play with my knives and think about my tragic childhood?"

He raises a brow as he walks around the desk and sits on the edge, nursing his drink, watching me like he's waiting for the right moment to pounce.

Yeah. He's not here to hang out. He's here to play.

And I'm more than ready.

Julian swirls the whiskey in his glass, eyes flicking to the knife still resting between my fingers.

"You always this jumpy when you're alone?" he asks casually.

I grin, twirling the blade again, slower this time. "Only when I'm thinking about you."

That earns me the faintest twitch of a smile. Not quite a smirk, but close.

He sips the whiskey again. "I saw your aim," he says, nodding toward the wall, where my mother's portrait still hangs, the knife embedded deep between her eyes.

"Were you watching me through the surveillance, dear brother?"

He shrugs. "Nice shot."

"She earned it."

Julian just looks at me, long and hard, like he sees past the joke, past the grin I wear like armor. He has always been able to cut through the noise without needing a blade.

"You alright?" he asks, and the question lands heavier than I expect.

I should say yes and throw back some flippant comment, redirect the conversation, toss the spotlight somewhere else, but I don't.

Instead, I look up at him. "Do I look alright?"

"No, but you don't look like you need saving, either."

The calm and steady way he calls me out pisses me off and makes me want to kiss him in the same breath.

Julian leans forward, setting his glass down on the desk between us. He braces his hands on either side of it, leaning in until his face is just inches from mine. His voice drops.

“Max, if you want me to go, say it now. Otherwise…”

The rest floats between us like smoke.

I lower the knife to the desk, the tip dragging a slow line through the wood grain.

“I never want you to go. You know that.”

The heat in his eyes flares, and suddenly, the space between us feels much smaller.

Julian straightens, just enough to slide around the desk and into my space, close enough for his thigh to press against mine.

“Good,” he murmurs. “Because I’m not just here to talk tonight.”

He leans in, brushing his lips against mine in that slow, teasing way that always drives me a little mad.

Fuck, I *need* him.

He grabs the knife off the desk and presses it against my neck, right at the most dangerous spot, and I groan—of course, it turns me on.

Julian knows what I need, exactly when I need it. He must’ve seen something in my eyes tonight, maybe even caught it on the cameras. He came to my rescue without asking, even though he still insists I don’t need saving.

I don’t, but it doesn’t matter.

This is why I’m madly, deeply, irreparably in love with him.

He leans in, his mouth grazing my ear, his voice a low, demanding growl. “Say it.”

Julian is the only one who can bring me to my knees—literally and otherwise.

“I burn for you, Julian,” I breathe, giving him exactly what he’s after. “Now… hurt me. Please.”

A sound rumbles deep in his chest, and he rips my shirt open, buttons scattering across the floor like shrapnel.

The blade grazes over my chest, tracing the curve of old ink and healed scars.

Then, just over my left pec, where the skin is already marked by memory, he presses harder.

The knife bites in.

I hiss, a sharp intake of breath, but I don't stop him.

I watch as Julian carves our initials into my skin with the same precision he uses for everything else. Over my heart—where he has always lived.

Blood starts to bead and trail downward.

As Julian cuts into me, each slow drag of the blade burning against my skin, my other hand slips down instinctively. I shove it into my trousers and grip my hard cock, taking it out to relieve the ache, the need.

The pleasure tangled in the pain is too much. His presence, the feel of the knife, the heat in his eyes as he watches my blood seep out—it's all driving me wild.

He looks down where I'm relentlessly tugging at my cock, then back up at me. His mouth curls at the corner.

"You always were a beautiful mess," he murmurs. "And all mine."

The words hit harder than the blade.

"Fuck, Julian," I mumble. He's the only one who can unravel me like this.

I keep stroking my length until I'm whimpering. I press a hand flat against the desk to steady myself, but it's useless. I'm shaking from the pressure building beneath my skin—the ache only he can draw out of me, the way he always has.

Julian leans closer, close enough for me to feel his breath against my mouth. "Good," he murmurs, low and rough.

My orgasm crests, fast, and my whole body locks up for a heartbeat, then releases.

In that exact moment, Julian captures my mouth with his, and his hand cups the side of my face, grounding me as everything else spirals.

I cling to the kiss like a lifeline, lips moving against his, desperate and grateful all at once.

The kiss is searing, possessive. It swallows the ragged sound that tears from my throat as my whole world tilts on its axis.

Then, Julian releases me and slides his mouth around my cock, taking all of me as hot ropes of cum jet down his throat. I shout, my hands grabbing his head to milk every last ounce of pleasure.

Julian doesn’t pull away, even when my entire body jolts with the remnants of my climax, not able to take any more.

And I let him.

Because he’s the only one I’ve ever wanted to fall apart for.

Until now.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

JULIAN

Maxwell's breathing is uneven, skin flushed, chest still slick with blood and sweat. The initials carved over his heart are raw and angry—mine and his, etched like a vow.

He looks… content. Or as close to it as Max can get.

I grab a clean towel from the drawer in the corner of his office and kneel beside him, pressing it gently to the wound. He hisses through his teeth but doesn't stop me.

With one hand still holding the cloth in place, I reach for the first-aid kit stashed beneath the desk, popping it open to find gauze and medical tape.

"You're gonna scar this time," I murmur.

He smirks. "Good."

I shake my head, a breath of a laugh slipping free despite myself.

I was watching him earlier, sitting in the back surveillance room, flipping through the camera feeds out of habit more than anything. And there he was, slouched in his chair, Vico in one hand, a knife in the other, staring at that old portrait like he wanted to set the whole place on fire.

He doesn't say when he needs help. He doesn't know how.

But I know. I always do.

"Get another shirt," I tell him. "We're leaving soon."

Max blinks. "Where?"

I stand, wiping my hands and tossing the bloodied towel in the bin. "To see her."

His expression hardens instantly. He doesn't ask who I mean.

"Why now?"

“Because it’s time.”

He hesitates, just for a beat, then sighs and nods, pushing himself up off the desk.

We leave the office together, and on the way, we stop by the house.

Theodore is already waiting by the front door, Isabel next to him. She has her arms crossed, hair pulled back, that same fire in her eyes that’s always there when she’s trying to look like she doesn’t care.

Theodore gives me a knowing glance as we approach. “You ready?” he asks.

I nod once.

Isabel raises a brow, looking between the three of us. “Where exactly are we going?”

“To visit the dead.”

AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER, WE ARRIVE IN HOLLOW PINE, A QUIET, almost-forgotten cottage town just outside the reach of Ebonridge’s decay. It’s the kind of place people come to when they’re trying to pretend the world isn’t falling apart. Neatly lined trees. Gravel roads. Birds that don’t seem afraid of people.

It’s peaceful, deceptively so.

We pull up to the house—a sprawling vacation-style home nestled at the edge of the woods. It’s not as big as the Whitmore estate, but it still has that same untouched, too-clean kind of grandeur, like no one lives here, but someone wants you to think they do.

I roll the car to a stop and cut off the engine.

Isabel opens the door, one foot hitting the gravel before she pauses. I can see the stiffness in her body, the tension in her shoulders, the way her eyes scan the windows like she’s expecting the house to stare back.

Theodore gets out first, and Maxwell follows. He slams his door shut and stalks ahead, but Isabel stays put.

I lean in from the driver’s seat, my hand reaching for hers before she can pull away.

“Hey,” I whisper. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

She glances at me, unsure, her lips parting just slightly.

“Corazón,” I murmur again, the word softer this time, “you’re not alone.”

Her throat bobs as she swallows, eyes flicking to the house again.

Then, she nods, just once, and finally steps out of the car.

We step up to the house, the wooden steps creaking beneath our feet. Isabel lingers between me and Theodore, her brows furrowed, her steps cautious.

“Whose place is this?” she whispers, eyes flicking toward the windows again.

No one answers.

She tries again, voice sharper now. “Julian. Seriously.”

Still, I say nothing, because there’s no easy way to explain what’s waiting on the other side of that door.

The wind picks up around us, rustling the trees, and just as Maxwell lifts his hand to knock, the door swings open.

Isabel stiffens beside me, and her breath hitches.

Standing in the doorway is a woman dressed in a pressed cream blouse, a dark skirt that falls just below her knees, and heels too elegant for gravel. Her hair is styled, makeup pristine, like she’s moments away from stepping out for afternoon tea with someone important.

Isabel inhales sharply and blanches. She recognizes her.

Theodore is the one who speaks. “Hello, Mother.”

For a moment, our adoptive parent doesn’t move. Then, she shifts to the side, her posture perfect, her chin tilted with just enough grace to remind us she’s still in control.

“Come in,” she says.

The living room smells like lemon polish and faint lavender, the kind of scent that clings to furniture and skin. Everything is tidy. The couches haven’t been disturbed, and the tea set on the tray hasn’t been touched. It feels like it has been staged.

She leads us to the guest room—a polished little parlor with high-backed chairs and thin lace curtains that let in just enough light to wash the walls in gray.

We sit.

Isabel is beside me, her spine rigid. She leans in close. “What are we doing here?”

I keep my eyes ahead and answer quietly, “You’ll see.”

Our mother—because she'll always insist on the title, no matter what we've become—crosses one leg over the other and folds her hands in her lap.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this unannounced visit?" she asks, her tone almost amused.

Theodore rests his arm along the back of the couch. "We wanted to check in, see how you're doing."

She lifts one perfectly sculpted brow. "How I'm doing?"

Maxwell lets out a dry laugh under his breath.

Our mother doesn't even look at him.

"It's been over six months," she says coolly. "And now, suddenly, you all decide to drop by. With a guest, no less."

Her gaze slides to Isabel and lingers. Not long enough to be rude, but long enough to be noticed.

"Why now?"

The question hangs in the air, and none of us answer. Not yet.

We didn't come here for pleasantries.

We came for the truth.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

My jaw is tight. It has been since the moment we stepped foot in Hollow Pine.

This place looks like a postcard, but it smells like secrets.

And my mother's smile? Still as sharp as the day she adopted us.

She sits there in her ivory blouse and pearls, legs crossed, posture flawless, pretending this is a polite family visit and not an interrogation waiting to happen.

I'm done pretending.

I study her for a beat longer, watching the way her fingers rest so delicately over her knee, not a single tremble or twitch to betray her. She has always been the master of composure.

But I know what's behind that mask.

"You haven't said a word about him," I say, keeping my voice even. "Lionel."

Her expression doesn't falter, but there's a flash in her eyes. "Your father," she says, as if she needs to remind us who he was. "It's been... difficult."

I almost laugh.

Difficult for whom?

Her gaze drifts to the window like she's searching for the right performance to give us, but she doesn't find it fast enough.

"I don't buy it," I tell her, leaning forward, elbows on my knees. "You didn't care about him when he was alive. Why start now?"

That gets her. A shadow crosses her face—it's brief, but it's there.

Julian shifts slightly beside me, and Maxwell, arms crossed, stares like he's waiting for the show to finally start.

"Lionel Whitmore," I continue, "was manipulative, power-hungry, and cruel. You knew it. You were *in it*. So don't sit there and feed us some sanctimonious sob story like you're the grieving widow."

Her lips press together in a fine line. No tears. No denial. Just that eerie silence she has always used to stay in control.

I'm not letting her steer this anymore.

"You knew exactly who he was," I say, quieter now. "And we know who *you* are."

She blinks once, and her jaw shifts.

"You're a Sotelo, a bloodline everyone thought vanished. But you didn't disappear, did you? You just changed your name and watched the rest of us drown in the legacy you tried to bury," I continue.

The temperature in the room drops.

Isabel stiffens next to Julian, her eyes wide, mouth slightly parted, but she doesn't interrupt. She has been waiting for this too.

Our mother exhales. "So you finally figured it out."

Julian sits up straighter. Maxwell's fingers twitch against his armrest. Isabel doesn't move, but I can feel the tension rippling off her like a current.

I lean forward. "Speak."

Mother sighs, smoothing a nonexistent wrinkle in her skirt before finally raising her eyes to meet mine.

"I was born Celeste Sotelo," she says, as if reciting a name from a storybook, not one tied to blood rituals and disappearances. "The last daughter of Mateo Sotelo. He was a visionary in his own right. Brilliant. Ruthless."

"And a monster," I snap.

"Yes. That too."

She glances toward the window, as if watching the past play out in the trees.

"I was married before Lionel," she says finally. "To a man who was perfect on paper. Wealthy. Respected. He was from a good family. The kind of match my parents approved of."

She pauses, fingers tightening slightly in her lap.

"We married after a few short months. It was... fine. He gave me everything a woman is supposed to want."

Mother looks down, and for the first time, I see the cracks in her composure.

“But I didn’t love him.” Her voice dips. “Then, I met Lionel.”

The name alone makes something sharp twist in my gut.

“He was magnetic,” she continues. “Charming. He knew how to talk, how to listen. I shouldn’t have given him a second glance, but I did. And once I did… I couldn’t stop.”

She lifts her eyes, meeting mine. “We were reckless. I was still married, but I kept seeing him. Sneaking away. Lying. Then, I found out I was pregnant.”

Julian shifts beside me, his jaw tight, and Maxwell goes unnervingly still.

“At the time, divorce would’ve destroyed my family,” she explains. “Especially if they knew I’d been unfaithful and gotten pregnant by another man. A Whitmore.” She gives a bitter smile. “That’s when Lionel came up with an idea…”

And I already know—I feel it in my bones. Whatever she’s about to say is going to change everything.

“A few weeks after I gave birth,” she says calmly, as if she’s not about to detonate every remaining truth we have, “Lionel and I made a plan.”

I shift forward, a tight coil of dread winding in my gut.

“He said if we wanted a clean slate and we wanted to raise our son without the weight of scandal or shame, we’d need to erase everything. My marriage. My family name. The child’s illegitimacy.”

Julian’s jaw ticks beside me. Maxwell doesn’t move, but I can see the storm brewing behind his eyes.

“We staged a car accident.”

My pulse spikes.

She folds her hands in her lap, perfectly poised. “It was supposed to look like I, my husband, and the baby were all in the vehicle. A tragic, fatal accident. The kind no one questions.”

Isabel’s breath catches. I glance at her. She has gone pale, arms wrapped tightly around her own torso, like she’s bracing for impact.

“But that night, only my husband and another woman were in the car, a woman Lionel convinced him to drive home after some fabricated excuse. The vehicle crashed, went off the road.”

Julian sits bolt upright. “You weren’t even in the car?”

She shakes her head slowly. “No. Neither was the baby.”

Maxwell lets out a disbelieving laugh that sounds more like a threat. “So you faked your deaths and walked away clean?”

“Clean enough,” she says. “The press took the bait. The funerals were arranged without open caskets, my former family… devastated.”

“And the woman in the car?” Isabel asks, her voice a whisper.

Our mother tilts her head, unblinking. “She was expendable. I didn’t even know her name.”

“Was Vanguard planning to sacrifice her?” Isabel questions.

Our mother turns toward her slowly and nods. “Yes. Lionel saw an opportunity.”

Isabel shakes her head. “So she was murdered for a lie. For *your* clean slate.”

“She was going to die either way,” our mother replies calmly. “At least this way, her death served a purpose.”

Maxwell shoots out of his chair so fast, it tips over behind him. “You’re fucking insane.”

Mother doesn’t blink. “You’ve known this about Lionel,” she says. “You lived under his roof, obeyed his rules. Don’t act surprised by the blood on the foundation now.”

Julian’s hand is clenched so tightly on the armrest, his knuckles are bone white.

My voice is calm when I speak. It always is, even when everything around me is coming undone.

“And what did you do with the baby?”

She tilts her head, as if she’s been waiting for this part.

“I took the baby to St. Dismas, knowing they’d be safe there until it was time to bring them back. It was only a matter of timing.”

I don’t flinch, but I feel Julian shift beside me. Maxwell stops pacing, and Isabel makes a soft noise, her eyes wide as they snap to me.

Me.

I sit back in my chair, pressing two fingers to my lips like I’m just thinking and not rewriting my entire fucking identity.

“So it was me.”

Her gaze meets mine without apology. “Yes.”

I just smile. It’s small. Hollow. Dangerous.

Lionel wanted his legacy intact, but only if it carried his blood. That's why they waited until I was old enough to adopt, to bring me back into the family—so he could groom me and shape me into his perfect successor.

"You were always meant to lead, my son. You have his mind," she adds.

That's when I finally let something shift in my expression. "No. I'm not Lionel Whitmore and I'll never be."

In that moment, I make a decision.

It doesn't matter what blood runs through my veins.

I will burn down everything they built, starting with my mother.

My thoughts flicker suddenly to Ronnie—to Camila. I lean forward again, eyes narrowed. "And what about Camila, your so-called adoptive daughter? How does she fit into all of this?"

Mother's composed mask falters for an instant, revealing something raw and real. "Camila wasn't merely adopted. She was my niece—my deceased sister's daughter. My sister was one of the last Sotelo women, and she was ultimately sacrificed during one of the Latibulum Noctis rituals."

Isabel gasps, covering her mouth, eyes wide in shock. "This is insane."

"If you and Lionel planned this from the start, why keep it from us? You never had a problem handing out cruelty," I press, holding her gaze. "Why deny yourselves the satisfaction of telling me who I really was?"

She meets my eyes, face unapologetic.

"Lionel believed it was necessary. If you had known the truth, you would've been uncontrollable. He needed obedience, loyalty. He needed a son he could mold."

Maxwell scoffs. Julian remains still, watching her every movement. Isabel stares openly, eyes wide with something between disbelief and disgust.

"You made a miscalculation." I tilt my head, lips curling into a cold smile. "I was never loyal to Lionel. I obeyed because it suited me, not because I was his son."

She leans forward slightly, a small smirk playing on her lips. "Exactly. Which is why he was right to hide it."

There it is—the bitter irony. Lionel hid the truth to keep control.

I give her a final look, a controlled calm settling deep within me. "You both underestimated me."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

ISABEL

Theodore rises smoothly, as if the earthquake of truth we just experienced hasn't touched him at all. But I see the subtle tension in his shoulders, the way his jaw ticks beneath his carefully controlled expression.

"Maxwell, Julian," Theodore says coolly, eyes never leaving his mother's face, "take her."

Celeste's eyes widen briefly, the poised mask finally cracking as Maxwell and Julian both rise. She starts to struggle when they grab her arms, but it's useless.

"You can't do this," she says, her voice snapping like brittle glass. "I'm your mother."

Maxwell lets out a dark laugh. "That ship sailed the second you chose Lionel Whitmore over your own blood."

Julian doesn't speak, his grip unyielding as they drag her toward the door. Celeste fights against them, pearls rattling around her throat, her dignity unraveling thread by thread.

When they disappear into the hallway, the silence left behind presses down on us.

Theodore moves toward the door, ready to follow, but my hand reaches for him instinctively, grazing his fingers just enough to make him pause.

"Theo, wait."

He stops, half-turning to look at me over his shoulder. His gaze is distant—he's not nearly as unaffected as he wants everyone to think.

He glances toward the open doorway before he quietly calls after his brothers, "Go ahead. We'll meet you outside."

Their footsteps fade, leaving us alone.

My throat feels tight when I whisper, “I’m sorry for everything you’re going through right now. I know it can’t be easy.”

Theodore stares at me for a moment, then lets out a slow breath, turning fully toward me.

“You don’t need to apologize for her sins, Isabel. You didn’t create this mess.”

I shake my head, stepping a bit closer. “No, but I know what it feels like to have your life flipped upside down.”

His eyes soften a fraction, something almost human emerging from beneath the careful control. He reaches out, fingers brushing gently over my wrist. The touch sends a quiet shiver up my spine.

My heart aches for him. “You’re not alone, Theo.”

He watches me carefully, eyes tracing my face, lingering like he’s searching for some hidden truth beneath my skin.

“You should hate me, Isabel. After everything we’ve put you through.”

I swallow, the confession burning at my throat. “I wanted to. I tried. But…”

He waits patiently, eyes never leaving mine. “Say it, Siren.”

My breath stalls, heartbeat thrashing in my chest. Before I can respond, Theodore reaches for me, his fingers gently pinching my chin, lifting my face toward him. He brings his lips dangerously close to mine, hovering there, temptation hanging between us like a fragile thread.

“Tell me how you really feel about me,” he whispers roughly, eyes dark, hungry, vulnerable all at once. “I need to hear it.”

I’m unraveling beneath his stare. Every wall I’ve built crumbles to dust.

“I love you,” I admit shakily, my voice trembling, heart cracking wide open.

I glance down, ashamed of the truth spilling from my mouth, before I force myself to meet his eyes again.

“I love you, even though you took me against my will. Even though you locked me up, took away my freedom—I can’t help it.”

My vision blurs slightly, but I push on, desperate for him to understand. “You gave me something I never could’ve found on my own.”

He inhales sharply, his grip tightening just a fraction. “What’s that?” he whispers.

I swallow hard, my chest burning. “A place to belong.”

Theodore’s lips crash to mine before I can draw another breath, hungry and consuming, stealing all coherent thoughts.

He breaks the kiss only long enough to speak, his breath hot against my mouth. “I think I’ve been in love with you from the moment I first saw you through those cameras,” he confesses roughly, pressing another deep kiss against my lips. “Halloween night, in that mermaid costume, looking like the most delectable siren.”

A shiver runs through my body, and my pulse spikes at his admission.

Then, he drops to his knees before me.

His hands slide up my thighs as he looks up at me, eyes dark with desperation. “I know what I did,” he murmurs, voice thick with emotion. “The lies. The manipulation. The way we took you—how I treated you. I don’t deserve an ounce of your forgiveness.” His hands tremble slightly against my skin. “But I’m begging you to forgive me, Isabel. Not because I want to erase what I did, but because I can’t breathe knowing I broke something so sacred between us. Your trust.” He presses a kiss to my stomach, his forehead resting against me. “Tell me I haven’t ruined it all. Tell me there’s still a chance to make it right” He looks up at me again. “Let me earn you.”

I reach out, brushing my fingers along the edge of his jaw. “I hate that you make me feel like this. “I hate that even after everything, I still fell in love with you. You’re the one person I can’t seem to let go of.”

He pushes me backward until my back hits the plush fabric of the couch, and then he positions himself above me, caging me in with his body. My fingers clutch desperately at his shoulders, needing something solid to hold onto as his mouth explores mine again, drawing me deeper into the storm that is Theodore Whitmore.

There’s no going back now, and I don’t want to.

His body presses me deeper into the couch, his weight warm and reassuring above me. I wrap my legs around his waist instinctively, pulling him even closer as heat builds between us.

Theodore kisses along my jaw, down my neck, his voice raw and honest against my skin. “I’ve spent every day since convincing myself I could control this, control you. But you’re the one who ended up controlling me.”

A quiet gasp escapes me at his confession, my heart pounding wildly in my chest. I thread my fingers into his hair, urging his mouth back to mine, needing to taste the truth of his words.

“I don’t regret any of it,” I whisper fiercely, the words tumbling out like an unstoppable wave. “I wouldn’t change a thing if it means ending up right here, with you.”

He groans, deep and primal, as he grinds his hips into mine, the friction sending a rush of desire straight through me. Our kisses become frantic, urgent, each one deeper, needier than the last, as if we’re trying to erase every painful memory between us and rewrite them into something softer, something better.

His hands roam my body, possessive yet reverent, as he whispers dark, worshipful promises into my skin. “I’ll spend the rest of my life making sure you never regret choosing me, Siren, even if it destroys me.”

Theodore lifts my dress up and tears off my panties, stuffing the wet fabric into my mouth. “I’m going to need you to be quiet, baby.”

He unbuckles his belt, quickly pulling his zipper down to free his hard cock.

My mouth salivates, the craving to feel him inside me almost unbearable.

He positions himself at my entrance. In this moment, with Theodore above me, his breath mingling with mine, his heartbeat echoing my own, I realize I’ve never felt safer—or more dangerously alive—in my entire life.

He fills me completely in one, swift thrust, and a sharp cry escapes around my gag, my eyes fluttering shut as overwhelming pleasure crashes through me.

Theodore’s rhythm is relentless, staking his claim in a way words never could. My fingers dig into his shoulders, desperate for purchase as my body arches to meet his every thrust. Heat coils tighter and tighter within me, burning hotter with every second.

“You’re mine, Isabel,” he growls roughly into my ear, the possessiveness in his voice sending another wave of pleasure crashing through me. “Say it. Tell me who you belong to.”

I struggle around my gag but manage to whimper something resembling his name. He removes my panties out of my mouth swiftly, his lips immediately claiming mine again in a heated kiss.

“You,” I gasp breathlessly when we part briefly. “I belong to you, Theodore.”

He groans low and deep, his pace quickening as his control slips, raw need and emotion taking over. I wrap myself tighter around him, matching

his urgency, letting him claim every piece of me.

"Forever," he murmurs against my lips. "No going back, Siren."

"I don't want to," I whisper back. "I'm yours. Completely."

Our bodies move as one, fierce and frantic yet strangely tender beneath the surface. Theodore's eyes lock onto mine, the intensity in them almost overwhelming. Pleasure builds rapidly, threatening to consume me entirely.

"Let go for me, Isabel," he commands softly, his voice thick with need. "I want to feel you break apart."

His words push me over the edge, and my climax hits hard and suddenly, a powerful wave that leaves me shuddering under him. Theodore follows moments later, groaning my name as he spills into me, sealing our fates in a final, desperate surge.

As the tension slowly drains from our bodies, Theodore presses his forehead to mine, our breath mingling. He gently kisses me again, softer this time.

"You're the only one who ever made me feel this way. Don't ever leave me, Isabel. Don't leave *us*."

"I couldn't even if I tried."

THE CAR RIDE IS QUIET. I DON'T DARE BREAK THE SILENCE, NOT WHEN Celeste is bound and gagged right next to me in the back seat of the SUV, her composure finally shattered. Her icy glare is fixed ahead, seething with fury. Theodore drives, gaze unwavering, hands tight around the wheel. Julian and Maxwell sit rigid in their seats.

We drive for what feels like hours, but it might only be minutes. None of the brothers mention where we're going, and right now, I'm not sure I even want to ask.

When Theodore finally pulls into a gravel driveway, I sit up straighter, squinting through the tinted windows. A large, imposing warehouse looms ahead, nestled against a backdrop of dense trees. Industrial lights illuminate the exterior in pools of harsh yellow, highlighting walls of weathered brick and steel.

Theodore parks, and the brothers step out without hesitation. Maxwell and Julian roughly haul Celeste from the car, her heels scraping uselessly

against the gravel as they drag her toward a set of wide double doors.

I hurry behind them, heart thudding. Once inside, my eyes take a moment to adjust to the dimness, the space slowly coming into focus.

We're in a vast, sprawling factory filled with tall copper stills and stainless steel tanks, each labeled meticulously with *Iron Veil* etched prominently in elegant script. Long, wooden barrels are stacked neatly against the far walls, and there's a faint scent of whiskey lingering in the air.

Rows of industrial shelves hold neatly organized bottles, boxes, and equipment. A small office is nestled in one corner behind wide glass windows, overseeing everything from its elevated vantage point.

We must be in Theodore's whiskey distillery.

"Take her to the basement," Theodore commands quietly.

Celeste's eyes widen instantly, panic replacing her earlier anger. She shakes her head frantically, muffled pleas spilling from beneath the gag, her polished composure finally shattering completely. Her heels dig into the smooth concrete floor as Maxwell and Julian drag her away, but it's futile—they easily overpower her struggles.

I watch as they disappear down a shadowed staircase at the far end of the factory. A chill snakes down my spine.

Theodore turns toward me, his expression softening. "Stay here with me for a few minutes."

I frown slightly, confused. Just as I'm about to question him, the heavy warehouse doors creak open again, and my heart jumps into my throat as two figures slowly step into view.

I squint as my gaze lands first on Ronnie—her dark curls, tattoos visible at the edges of her sleeves. But then my eyes flicker to the figure beside her, and my entire world tilts. It's Valeria.

A scream bursts from my lips before I can stop it, tears instantly blurring my vision. Valeria's eyes widen, her face crumbling as she breaks into sobs, running toward me as fast as her legs will carry her.

I rush forward to meet her halfway, our bodies colliding in a fierce, desperate embrace. Her arms tighten around me as she clutches me like she's afraid I'll vanish.

"Oh my God, Isa," she cries into my hair, her voice breaking, trembling with relief. "I've been looking everywhere for you. Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

I pull back just enough to see her clearly, tears streaming down my cheeks as I shake my head rapidly. “No, no, I’m fine, Val. I promise. I’m okay.”

Valeria cups my face gently, eyes scanning every inch, reassurance washing over her features. “Thank God. I was so scared I’d never see you again.”

I cling to her tightly once more, unwilling to let go just yet. Over her shoulder, my gaze meets Theodore’s. He stands silently beside Ronnie, both watching our reunion, though I swear there’s a hint of tenderness in Theo’s eyes that wasn’t there before.

“You’re safe now,” Valeria says, pulling back just enough to meet my eyes. “We’re here, and we’re not leaving without you.”

My heart tightens with gratitude as I hold onto Valeria, breathing in the familiar comfort of her embrace. But a knot forms in my stomach—how do I even begin to explain to my best friend that the three men who once kidnapped me have now become so deeply ingrained in my soul, I don’t think I can ever let them go?

I step back slightly, keeping Valeria’s hand in mine.

“Did you two plan this?” I ask Ronnie and Theodore.

Ronnie’s mouth curls into a sly smirk, eyes glinting mischievously as she crosses her arms. “Of course we did. Theodore called and explained what was going on with our mother, and we decided it was finally time for a reunion.”

Valeria snaps her head toward Ronnie, eyes narrowing with the kind of playful irritation I’ve missed so much. Ronnie immediately holds her hands up in mock surrender, a soft laugh escaping her lips.

“Desculpa, princesa,” she says, the Portuguese rolling effortlessly off her tongue. “I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

Valeria huffs, but there’s no real anger behind it.

My eyes drift back to Theodore, warmth spreading through my chest as our gazes connect, and I mouth, “Thank you.”

Theodore nods, stepping forward. “We’ll leave you two to catch up. Verónica and I need to head downstairs.”

Immediately, Valeria’s grip on my hand tightens, and I step toward Theo, urgency rising inside me.

“Wait. I want to come,” I argue.

“Me too,” Valeria echoes.

Theodore shakes his head. “This is something we need to deal with as a family. I promise you, everything is going to be okay.”

I hesitate, frustration coiling in my chest, but the quiet sincerity in Theodore’s voice eases some of my resistance.

“Are you sure?” I search his eyes for reassurance.

“I wouldn't say it if I wasn’t.” Theodore steps forward, cupping my cheek briefly. “Do you trust me?”

I nod reluctantly, glancing at Valeria. She exhales slowly, clearly unhappy with the arrangement, but eventually, she relents.

Verónica smiles gently at Valeria, mouthing a silent apology before following Theodore toward the staircase.

As they disappear downstairs, Valeria turns to me. Her brow lifts, a knowing look spreading slowly across her face as she crosses her arms.

“Isa...” She drags out my name with suspicion. “Is there something you need to tell me?”

Heat floods my cheeks instantly, and I swallow hard, averting my gaze in embarrassment. Valeria always sees straight through me. My heart pounds wildly as I search for words. How do I explain something even I can barely understand?

“It’s complicated,” I whisper finally, not meeting her eyes. “Really complicated.”

“Well, we’ve got some time, and you clearly have a lot of explaining to do.”

“You have no idea.”

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

THEODORE

Verónica follows closely behind me as we descend the metal stairs. I feel her anger simmering, ready to erupt at any moment.

"So, are you finally going to fill me in? I think it's about damn time I know why we dragged her here," Verónica demands.

I exhale deeply, pausing at the bottom of the stairs and turning to face her. "Mother is actually your aunt. Your birth mother was her sister."

Verónica's eyes widen in shock, her mouth opening slightly before snapping shut again.

"What the hell are you saying? You mean she knew exactly who I was when she took me in?"

"Yes, and not only did she know, but your mother was sacrificed at Latibulum Noctis. Mother allowed her family, her own flesh and blood, to be systematically destroyed for Lionel, for their twisted quest for power."

I take a moment to fill Verónica in on everything else we uncovered—that Celeste and Lionel are my biological parents, the staged car accident, Celeste's involvement with Vanguard, how she helped Lionel orchestrate the demise of the Sotelo family to solidify his control. Every detail I reveal only fuels the anger blazing in Verónica's eyes, her fists clenching tighter with each word.

When I finish, the disgust is evident on her face. "So, we're… cousins?"

I nod. "Don't look too repulsed."

A harsh laugh escapes her as she briefly looks away, collecting herself. Then, Verónica shakes her head slowly. "How could she do this to us? To

her own sister and family?”

“Because that’s who she is,” I tell her, bitterness seeping into my words. “Celeste traded her entire family—our family—for a chance at power. She was willing to sacrifice anything, anyone, for Lionel.”

“Then let’s give her exactly what she deserves. She needs to pay for everything she’s done.” Her voice is laced with the kind of fury that only betrayal can breed.

My lips curl into a dark smile, mirroring her fierce resolve.

“She will. By the time we’re done, Celeste will regret every decision she’s ever made.”

Verónica and I turn the corner into the basement, where Maxwell and Julian stand silently, arms crossed, their eyes narrowed on Celeste’s trembling figure. Her mascara has run down her cheeks, eyes wide with panic as muffled pleas spill from behind her gag. But as soon as she sees Verónica step from the shadows, her breath catches sharply, her eyes bulging in shock.

Verónica laughs bitterly, approaching slowly. “Hello, Mother. Or should I say, Aunt?” Her voice drips venom. “You didn’t know I was still alive, did you?”

Celeste shakes her head frantically, tears streaming down her face.

Verónica pauses right in front of her. “You remember that night, don’t you? When I accidentally stumbled into your precious Latibulum Noctis and saw the truth. Your twisted games. Your deadly sacrifices.”

Celeste’s muffled cries grow louder, pleading desperately, but Verónica doesn’t relent.

“Lionel couldn’t risk exposure. He gave the order to have me killed. Your husband was ready to slaughter your niece—the girl you pretended to raise as your daughter—without a second thought, and you did nothing to stop him.”

She pauses, letting her words sink in. Celeste looks shattered, shaking violently.

“But he underestimated me,” Verónica continues, calmer now, a cruel smile curving her lips. “I was rescued by the Solace Network, by women who refuse to let monsters like you win. They saved my life, hid me from Lionel, from Vanguard. I’ve spent every day since planning how I’d make him—and now you—suffer.” She leans in closer, her voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. “But you know what? I’m the one who set that mansion

ablaze with Lionel still inside. Your precious husband died begging for mercy, and I haven't lost a single night of sleep since."

Celeste's eyes widen in horror, fresh tears streaming down her cheeks as she unravels completely.

I step forward, standing beside Verónica, feeling fierce pride at the woman my sister—or cousin—has become. My voice cuts through Celeste's cries like a sharp blade.

"You wanted power, Celeste, but power comes at a cost. It's time for you to pay."

I turn slowly toward Maxwell. "Max, hand me one of your knives."

A dark, twisted smile curls Maxwell's lips as he steps forward. His fingers slip smoothly into his sleeve, and like a magic trick, he produces a shining blade, twirling it gracefully before handing it to me, handle first.

Celeste's frantic eyes fixate on the blade, terror etched deep into her features as she begins to sob uncontrollably.

"You should recognize these words, *Mother*," I say, stepping forward, eyes never leaving hers. "I'm sure you've heard them many times. But tonight, they're finally meant for you."

I begin chanting slowly, the ancient Vanguard ritual flowing effortlessly from my lips:

"In umbra mortis, pro sanguine vitae.

Quod seminas, nunc metes.

Mortem tuam accipimus, ut potentia nostra floreat."

Celeste struggles violently against her restraints, but it's useless. Her muffled cries are merely background noise to the words spilling from my mouth.

Julian and Maxwell watch, their faces shadowed with grim satisfaction. Beside me, Verónica stands tall, eyes burning with long-overdue vengeance.

I finish the chant, my voice ringing with cold finality, and slowly press the knife to Celeste's exposed neck.

Then, I draw the blade swiftly across her throat.

All I hear is the sound of her final breath, a wet gurgle that fades into silence.

Blood spills in a warm rush, staining the floor as Celeste's body slumps forward, the life draining from her eyes.

It's done.

I stare down at her, feeling hollow, but I’m also relieved, as if something has been cut out of me too.

Maxwell reaches forward to reclaim his knife, casually wiping it clean with a cloth. Julian exhales slowly, and Verónica stands motionless, her expression satisfied.

No one speaks. There’s nothing left to say.

The weight I’d been carrying finally lifts from my shoulders. Lionel’s legacy, the twisted Vanguard rituals—it’s all over now. Justice, as dark and merciless as it needed to be, has been served.

Killing Celeste didn’t only bring peace, it brought clarity.

Now, we’re finally free to build something new from the ruins.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

ISABEL

I ’ve spent the past hour catching Valeria up on every painful detail, every strange revelation, every conflicted emotion. It’s surreal, laying my heart bare like this, sharing truths that should be impossible to say aloud, but having her by my side makes it easier somehow.

Valeria sits quietly, absorbing each detail without judgment. Her eyes grow wider and wider as I talk about the brothers, the twisted legacy of Vanguard, the unexpected, complicated feelings that have grown within me. She squeezes my hand gently, giving me silent reassurance that whatever happens next, she won’t leave my side.

The door creaks open suddenly, and both our heads snap up. Theodore, Maxwell, Julian, and Verónica step into the room, their expressions solemn. It doesn’t take words to understand exactly what just happened.

It’s over.

My eyes meet Theodore’s first, then Julian’s, and finally Maxwell’s. Each gives me a subtle, reassuring nod, confirming everything without uttering a single word.

I should probably feel conflicted, knowing they’ve just taken a life, especially the life of the woman who raised them. But knowing Celeste’s monstrous history, what she has done and allowed to be done, leaves no room for sympathy in my heart. Whatever happened downstairs was justice. Maybe not the kind found in courtrooms, but justice, nonetheless.

Julian approaches me, his eyes softening as he gently grips my shoulder. “Are you okay, corazón?” he murmurs, voice soft and comforting.

I nod, breathing deeply as relief floods through me. I wrap my arms around him, pulling him close. For a moment, Julian tenses in surprise before slowly melting into my embrace, holding me tightly, protectively.

When we pull apart, I glance over Julian's shoulder toward Maxwell, who's watching us with a glint in his dark eyes. He tosses me one of his playful winks, a smirk dancing across his lips. I can't help but smile back. Even in this darkness, Maxwell has a way of making me feel safe, wanted.

Theodore's calm gaze is on me. His eyes soften slightly, the corner of his mouth lifting subtly in acknowledgment. "Let's go home," he says.

Home.

The thought catches me off guard. The Whitmore estate has become my home, and strangely enough, it feels right.

As we leave the warehouse, stepping into the crisp night air, I glance back one last time at the darkened building. We're leaving behind the pain, the secrets, the twisted legacy we've fought so hard against.

Now, we're free to build something new—something ours.

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE

OceanofPDF.com

Isabel

The morning sunlight filters through the tall, expansive windows, bathing the new house in a golden glow. I pause halfway down the grand staircase, fingertips trailing over the smooth railing, taking a quiet moment to breathe it all in.

It's still surreal, even after a year.

The Whitmore mansion is reborn, rising from the literal ashes of the old one. The brothers insisted I be involved in every detail, every decision, from the architecture to the décor, weaving my presence into every room of the house. A home built from trauma but shaped by our shared healing.

I still haven't figured out who my real family is, but I won't give up. Julian has been helping me sift through Ebonridge's archives, searching for any thread that might lead me to the truth. Theodore has been pulling strings, reaching through his network of connections in ways I don't dare question. Progress is slow, frustratingly so, but at least I'm not searching alone anymore.

And maybe that's what matters most, because even without answers, I have a family now, in the strangest, most unexpected way. Verónica and Valeria come around often, their presence adding warmth to the house. Ronnie has even grown closer to her adoptive brothers and cousin, blurring the lines between blood and bond until it doesn't really matter anymore. We're one big, dysfunctional mess, stitched together by circumstance, by choice, by something that feels an awful lot like love.

I can't help the scoff that escapes as the memory surfaces of the night we came back to the estate almost a year ago. Theodore, Julian, and Maxwell quietly sat me down, faces serious, and simply said I was free. I could go, if that's what I truly wanted.

I was furious. Confused. Hurt. How could they think it was that simple?

I'd lost it then, yelling at them like a madwoman, demanding to know how they dared set me free after stealing over half a year of my life—after weaving themselves so intricately into every part of me. My heart. My mind. My soul. They'd broken and rebuilt me, taken everything, only to casually give it all back?

No.

I told them it was too late, that they couldn’t just unravel me and expect me to stitch myself back together without them. I refused to leave, refused to even consider it.

And those three men—those infuriating, complicated, beautiful men—simply smiled at me. Theodore’s mouth curled knowingly, Julian’s eyes lit up with warmth, and Maxwell’s smirk grew wider than I’d ever seen it.

Because they knew exactly what they were doing. It was never really about letting me go. It was about me finally choosing them.

And I did.

Somewhere along the way, I fell for all three of them.

What I have with Theodore is intense, intimate—undeniably a relationship. With Julian and Maxwell, it’s different. They don’t come to me separately; they come as a pair, always moving in sync, always knowing what the other needs. They don’t ask for love the same way Theodore does, but it’s there, deeply rooted.

The lines are messy, blurred in all the ways that should scare me, but they don’t. Somehow, it works.

I love them.

Each brother fulfills a part of me I didn’t know was missing.

“Are you planning on staying there all night, Siren?” Theodore’s smooth voice cuts through my thoughts from the bottom of the staircase.

I glance down, finding all three of them gathered there, watching me intently. Julian smiles tenderly, dark eyes full of admiration. Maxwell stands beside him, leaning casually against the wall, his gaze mischievous and inviting as always. Theodore remains poised in the center, the calm, reassuring presence that anchors us all.

I raise an eyebrow playfully. “Just enjoying the view.”

Maxwell chuckles deeply, shaking his head. “Careful now, Starling. Flattery will get you everywhere.”

Julian rolls his eyes, nudging Maxwell with his shoulder. “Behave.”

Theodore steps forward, reaching a hand toward me. “Come join us. We have a surprise for you,” he announces, lips quirking up at the corners.

“A surprise?” My brows knit together suspiciously.

Maxwell appears beside me, twirling a strip of black silk between his fingers, eyes mischievous. “Trust us?”

I hesitate, heart fluttering nervously, but I nod. “Do I have a choice?”

Julian chuckles, gently turning me around. “Not really, corazón.”

Maxwell ties the soft blindfold over my eyes, plunging me into total darkness. My pulse quickens as one of them takes my hand.

“Relax, Siren. You’ll enjoy this,” Theodore whispers in my ear.

My throat tightens, anticipation twisting through my veins as they carefully guide me forward. The cool morning air brushes my skin, and the soft grass beneath my feet signals we’re outdoors. Confusion fills my mind.

Where are we going?

After a few minutes of walking, we finally come to a stop.

Gentle fingers untie the blindfold, letting it fall away. Blinking, I immediately recognize our location. We’re standing at the edge of the forest—the same one they let me run into all those months ago, when I first tried to escape their grasp.

My heart leaps, chest tightening as realization dawns on me. My breathing quickens as I slowly turn to face them, suspicion confirmed by the dangerous, excited gleam in their eyes.

“You’re not...” I whisper, unable to finish the thought.

Maxwell’s grin is wicked, his eyes sparking with uncontained thrill. “Oh, we absolutely are, Starling.”

OceanofPDF.com

Maxwell

The past year has been a fucking whirlwind.

When Isabel told us she'd stay, that she wasn't leaving after everything we'd done, the relief I felt nearly knocked me off my feet. Relief wasn't something I was accustomed to. Neither was attachment. But somehow, this vile little creature had clawed her way under my skin and settled herself there permanently.

It was a strange feeling, something I could only call love. It was a deep, consuming need, growing stronger every single day. It's wild to think about how effortlessly she broke down every defense I'd carefully built.

And the nights when she joins Julian and me in bed are my favorite, even if all we do is lie there, tangled up together. Her soft breath against my neck, Julian's steady heartbeat grounding us. The simple closeness alone is enough to unravel me.

Fuck. I've gone soft.

I shake myself back to the present, focusing again on Isabel's face. She looks like a deer caught in headlights, chest heaving. There's fear in her eyes, but it's the exact kind I love. The kind I can mold, shape, transform into the sweetest desire.

I'm unable to hide the devilish grin spreading across my lips. "Run, Starling. Let's see how far you make it this time."

Isabel bolts, flying into the darkness like her life depends on it.

We wait, counting slowly, letting some distance build between us. Finally, Theodore nods, and we move forward into the dense forest. The trees loom overhead as dusk stretches its darkening fingers through the branches.

My eyes scan the trees. Isabel still doesn't really know her way around these woods, and I can't help but grin. She's stubborn, relentless, and it's fucking intoxicating.

Just then, a tiny movement catches my attention: a flash of her hair whipping behind a thick oak.

I grin wide, excitement racing through my veins. *Gotcha*.

"Oh, Starling. Come out, come out, wherever you are. These woods are dark, and there are monsters outside," I call out, my voice dripping with twisted delight.

A sinister chuckle escapes my throat as I casually twirl my knife between my fingers, stepping forward slowly, savoring every delicious moment of her fear.

We whirl around just in time to see Isabel's figure dart through the shadows, slipping past us like a ghost.

"There she goes," Julian growls eagerly beside me.

I lunge forward, heart hammering wildly as I chase after her, Julian and Theodore fanning out on either side. Twigs snap sharply underfoot, blending with our ragged gasps, creating an intoxicating symphony of fear and excitement.

She turns abruptly, and I can hear her footsteps ricochet to my left, then right, teasingly close yet always just out of reach. Theodore's low chuckle rumbles like distant thunder, Julian's steady breath pulses behind me, the rustle of their movements weaving seamlessly with mine. We're closing in on her.

"Keep running, Isabel," Theodore's taunts. "You know how much we love this game."

Her startled cry rings out, bouncing chaotically through the darkness, sending another burst of adrenaline racing down my spine.

"Run, little Starling. Fly, fly, as fast as you dare. The deeper you go, the closer the snare."

She's ours. It's only a matter of time.

OceanofPDF.com

Julian

I move through the shadows like a silent predator among the trees, heart pounding with excitement as we close in on Isabel.

It’s almost unbelievable that a full year has passed since the night we ended the nightmare with Celeste. Since then, everything has changed, especially me.

I was always the quiet one, the observer. I expected Isabel to overlook me in favor of Theodore’s strength or Maxwell’s madness, but somehow, I found myself woven deep within her heart, a place uniquely reserved just for me. Maybe it was because I took care of her, cooked for her, drew her likeness again and again, capturing every soft curve and stubborn tilt of her chin on paper. Maybe it was because I saw her differently in a way my brothers never could.

She’s now permanently etched in my life—and on my skin. A few months into our new normal, I tattooed her name over my chest, directly above my heart. A testament to her permanent place within me.

I’ve only loved three people in my life—my mama, Theodore, and Maxwell—and now, Isabel makes four. I’d do absolutely anything just to see that beautiful smile she sometimes hides behind her tough exterior.

A sudden crack of a twig breaks me out of my thoughts, drawing me back to the chase. My heartbeat quickens, ears tuned to every small sound in the darkening forest.

We burst through the trees in perfect unison, and Isabel cries out in surprise, stumbling back as we surround her. Theodore blocks her escape, and I step forward, my gaze locked firmly on her.

She tries to wriggle away, but her movements lack conviction. She’s breathing hard, cheeks flushed deep crimson.

She’s exactly where she wants to be.

“Oh, corazón,” I whisper gently, reaching out and brushing my thumb across her flushed cheek. She leans into my touch instinctively, even as she trembles. “Did you think we’d go easy on you?”

Isabel lets out a shaky breath.

Maxwell moves behind her, tilting her head back gently, exposing the vulnerable curve of her neck. Theodore steps closer, eyes dark and possessive.

Unlike the first time, when we caught her and carried her back home, tonight, we have no intention of keeping things quiet.

Tonight, the entire forest will hear exactly how well Isabel fits into our twisted little family.

OceanofPDF.com

Theodore

After everything that happened—the truth, the blood, the headlines screaming the names of Vanguard's most powerful—I banished every man who stood against what I believed in, every coward clinging to rituals and gods no one should've ever worshipped. Vanguard was never meant to be a temple for sacrifice—it was supposed to be a legacy of influence. Of power, yes, but not the kind that bled women dry under candlelight.

So, I tore it apart.

Latibulum Noctis is gone, and I won't let it rise again. Slowly, Vanguard is becoming the vision my brothers and I always dreamed of, back when we thought the world could still be shaped by our hands.

A place for men who want to build, grow, and succeed. A club for the sharp, the brilliant, the ruthless—in business and in ambition. With just enough pleasure to keep things interesting.

Since then, Isabel has returned to The Black Quill, and damn, if she hasn't started lighting more fires across Ebonridge than I ever could. Every week, another truth is unburied, another secret laid bare. She's not just changing the narrative—she's rewriting the whole damn book and people are finally listening.

The Whitmore name may not belong to us anymore, not in the way it used to. But we still carry it, Maxwell, Julian, and me, because we're the ones who'll make sure it means something different now.

We can't change where we came from, but we sure as hell can decide where we're going.

I snap back to the present, my pulse pounding in my veins as I watch Isabel tremble deliciously between Julian and Maxwell, her flushed skin glowing beneath the dusk's fading light.

A whole year, and this woman still consumes my every waking thought. The obsession that once felt dangerous and twisted has blossomed into something even more profound. I'm irrevocably bound to her, tangled in her spell, desperate for every little piece of Isabel that she's willing to offer me.

It's love, though it goes far beyond anything that simple word could ever capture.

She's mine. Ours. And I intend to keep it that way—forever.

I can already picture it: a lifetime filled with her smiles, her laughter, even her fiery temper. More than anything, I ache to see her belly swell with my babies. The thought sends a primal possessiveness roaring through my blood, an instinct so fierce, it almost frightens me. Isabel round and glowing, carrying my children—my heirs, my legacy—is something I didn't know I needed until her.

And I will make it happen. She'll be mine, fully and completely, marked in every way possible. I'll never let her slip away.

I shake myself from the intoxicating vision and lock eyes with my siren. Her pupils dilate under my stare, her breath quickening, as if she can feel every raw thought flooding my mind.

"Tonight, we're going to make sure you never forget who owns you."

Her eyes widen, and her lips part with anticipation.

Julian swiftly spins Isabel around, pressing her back roughly against the harsh bark of the tree. Her breath catches sharply as Maxwell pulls a rope from his pocket and secures her body to the trunk, binding her wrists tight enough to hold her in place.

She squirms slightly, testing the strength of the rope. She isn't going anywhere, not until we're finished with her.

I step closer and lift the silk blindfold toward her face. Isabel's eyes flare with sudden panic, but she stays silent, accepting her fate as I plunge her into darkness.

"Stay still so we can take exactly what we want from you."

She trembles under my touch, and I impatiently tear her shirt down, exposing her tits to the cool night air. I nod at Julian and Maxwell, who immediately close in, their mouths claiming her nipples roughly.

Isabel gasps, moaning sharply, surrendering completely to our control.

I swiftly pull down her pants, my fingers slipping between her folds, and I smile darkly.

She's ready.

"Your cunt is already weeping for us, Siren."

I whip out my painfully hard cock and grip her hips firmly, rutting into her wet pussy, claiming her in the way I know she craves.

Isabel screams, and the sound is music to my ears.

"You're mine, Isabel," I whisper harshly against her ear, each word punctuated by my hips. "Ours forever."

"Yes. Yours," she breathes.

Julian and Maxwell hold her firmly in place, their mouths still locked onto her tits, fueling her desire, making her tremble between us. They lick, suck, and nibble on her nipples as I pound into her mercilessly. She's lost in sensation, trapped in the sweet agony of our control.

"I'm going to fill you until there's no doubt left," I growl roughly into her ear, tightening my grip on her hips. "Until every part of you knows exactly who you belong to."

I fuck Isabel relentlessly, driven by the primal need to claim her.

I drive us toward the edge until I feel her body tighten, her pulse racing wildly beneath my fingers. Isabel cries out, "Please, don't stop. *Please*," as her climax washes over her in waves, and I follow close behind, her name a fierce growl on my lips.

As she collapses into us, breathless and trembling, I press a gentle kiss to her shoulder, whispering softly, "You're my forever, Siren."

OceanofPDF.com

Isabel

Maxwell and Julian finally release their mouths from my breasts.

My legs tremble, unsteady. Theodore pulls away slowly, and I gasp as I feel warmth trickle down my thigh.

Maxwell sinks gracefully to his knees in front of me, eyes sparkling with devilish amusement. He holds my gaze, lips curling into a wicked smile as he leans forward and slowly drags his tongue along my inner thigh, savoring Theodore's cum.

My body tightens once more as desire coils in my belly. I barely have time to process the sensation before Maxwell rises, gripping Julian by the back of his neck and capturing his lips in a deep, fierce kiss, sharing Theodore's taste.

Oh, God.

The sight alone nearly undoes me. I'm weak, breathless, but my hunger isn't satisfied yet.

Theodore chuckles. "My dirty fucking boys," he murmurs appreciatively, his eyes fixed on Julian and Maxwell as they finally pull apart.

Before I have time to steady myself, Maxwell drops to his knees again, closing his lips over my pussy, sucking my clit into his mouth.

I moan loudly at the unexpected contact. "Fuck, Max," I sob.

He pulls out his knife, and my pulse jumps when he presses the blade to the tender skin of my thigh.

The sharp sting combines with the pleasure coursing through me, the two sensations blending into something dizzying.

His tongue laps over my clit, and it's overwhelming. My body tightens, trembling uncontrollably as my climax crashes through me again, shattering my thoughts.

When my breathing steadies, I glance down to see what Maxwell carved into my skin.

Madcap.

He rises slowly and frees his cock from his trousers before he leans in, lips brushing my ear as he tugs on his hard length.

"Careful, Starling. You're playing dangerous games with dangerous men," he whispers, chuckling softly. "But that's exactly how you like it,

isn’t it?”

Maxwell pushes inside me, claiming me roughly, and every nerve in my body ignites until all I can feel is him.

“Forever trapped inside this beautiful, twisted madhouse,” he groans with intense thrusts.

Theodore and Julian watch, their eyes hungry as they savor every moment, their unwavering attention heightening everything.

Maxwell continues to whisper taunts and teasing promises in my ear, guiding me deeper into his chaos. His maddening rhythm pushes me closer to another orgasm. I can barely keep track of time. I’m lost in sensations, surrendering completely until pleasure overwhelms me, and I come so hard, my head spins.

Maxwell’s low laughter tickles my ear as I shatter, trembling as his own climax overtakes him moments later.

“You’re trapped in this madness forever, Starling,” he whispers breathlessly. “And I promise, we’ll keep you beautifully broken.”

I lean against him, heart hammering wildly, knowing every word he said is true.

OceanofPDF.com

Julian

Maxwell finally pulls away, leaving Isabel boneless. She looks beautifully ruined, but the night isn't over yet—not until each of us has had our turn.

My cock throbs as I approach her, needing her so badly, it hurts. When I release myself, no longer able to stay contained in my jeans, her eyes flick down to me, widening slightly, and I offer a slow, confident smirk.

"Ready for more, mama?"

She nods, unable to speak, breaths trembling through parted lips, but her eyes convey everything. Isabel would never deny me, just as I would never deny her.

Reaching out, I take Maxwell's knife, still slick with her blood, and carefully cut through the ropes that bind her. She sways immediately, nearly collapsing into my waiting arms.

Gently, I lower her onto the soft, mossy ground, settling above her. I want to watch every reaction as I unravel her completely.

She gazes up at me, trust, and need shining clearly in her eyes, and I know tonight, I'll capture another memory of Isabel I'll never forget.

I rub the tip of my cock against her swollen clit, and her body jerks. Then, I push inside her wet and warm cunt.

"You're so beautiful, Isabel," I whisper softly, brushing a strand of damp hair from her forehead as her cheeks flush.

I move forward slowly, claiming her with tenderness. Her fingers find their way to my back, gripping tightly, holding on like she'll never let go.

"Keep looking at me, corazón. I want to watch every moment of you falling apart."

Our eyes remain locked.

"You feel so fucking good, mi amor," I whisper. "Are you ready to come for me?"

She nods, never breaking my gaze, letting me see every shiver, every soft cry that leaves her lips as I guide her closer to the edge.

"Yes, please, Julian," she whimpers. "I'm so full."

I fuck her at a steady pace as she shatters beneath me, screaming my name. I follow right behind, knowing in my heart I'll spend the rest of my life memorizing every inch of her.

I lift Isabel gently, supporting her weight as I carefully help her sit upright. She immediately leans into me, exhausted yet content.

“You did so well, corazón,” I mutter softly against her ear, pressing a tender kiss to her temple.

Maxwell steps closer to brush a gentle hand down her back, teasing but affectionate. “Our perfect little starling.”

Theodore crouches so he’s eye-level with Isabel. He cups her chin gently, tilting her gaze toward his. “And you’ll always be our siren.”

Isabel’s lips curl into a soft, exhausted smile, her voice barely above a whisper. “Always.”

OceanofPDF.com

BONUS EPILOGUE

OceanofPDF.com

ISABEL

The first time I wore a mermaid costume, I didn’t know I was walking into the jaws of a legacy soaked in blood and obsession.

I didn’t know I’d survive it.

This time, I wear it like armor… and bait.

I’m in a seafoam slip dress again—even thinner and sluttier than the last. Pearls glint between my breasts. The skirt rides high, and my thighs still bear the bruised fingerprints of the three brothers.

Madhouse is still empty—just us upstairs in the playroom. The Halloween party doesn’t start for another hour, but the air already tastes like smoke, sweat, and sin. Candles flicker in rusted sconces, chains hang like ornaments from the ceiling, and leather straps dangle from the Saint Andrew’s cross near the mirror. The playroom breathes darkness. It always has.

Maxwell leans against the wall in black slacks and nothing else, his tattooed chest streaked in chaotic red, like claw marks dragged down over his heart. There’s glitter in his hair, and a blood-red grin painted on his mouth. His gaze drops and his tongue brushes across his bottom lip like he’s already tasting me.

Julian is a fallen angel, shadowy wings stretched across his back, black pants hanging low, his sculpted, inked torso dusted in silver. A single black chain hangs from his neck, glinting with a halo. He watches me like I’m something sacred and he’s deciding whether to worship me or tear me apart.

Theodore is the devil himself.

Black velvet suit. Horns curled low over his head. Tie undone. Eyes sharp. His mouth is stained from the Iron Veil whiskey he’s been nursing, and his gaze says: You're not walking out of here unscathed. He hasn’t stopped staring since I stepped into the room.

“A siren luring monsters with a mouth too pretty for prayers and a body built to be bred,” Theodore says, and my entire body shivers.

Maxwell whistles. “You trying to get fucked right here in front of the mirror, Starling? ‘Cause that’s how you get ruined before the party even starts.”

I smile. “What if I am,” I murmur, stepping closer.

Theodore growls. “Then get on the fucking bed.”

Want the full, filthy ending of the brothers breeding Isabel?

This exclusive scene is only available to subscribers. Scan below to join my newsletter and read the rest—plus get access to more bonus content, teasers, and sneak peeks.

OceanofPDF.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To everyone who dared to step into the darkness with me—thank you! Your support means more than words can ever say.

Silent Oaths is my first why choose story, and I'm endlessly proud of how it turned out. This book pushed me, consumed me, and ultimately became something I'll always hold close to my heart.

To my friends and colleagues who read this story before it ever saw the light of day, thank you! Your feedback, your encouragement, and your honesty meant the world to me. I value your input more than I can express, and I'm so grateful to have had your eyes on this book!

To my family, for your patience, your love, and your steady belief in me even when I'm buried in fictional madness.

Always and forever,

Nouha

OceanofPDF.com

ALSO BY NOUHA JULLIENNE

The Whitmore Legacy Series – Dark Gothic Romance

Mourning Wings

Silent Oaths

Godfathers of the Night Series - Dark Mafia Romance

The Diávolos: Part One

The Diávolos: Part Two

The Sotíras

Sinners and Saints Series - Motorcycle Club x Cowboy Romance

King of Sinners

Heart of Saints

OceanofPDF.com